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Winning the Wilderness

Margaret Hill McCarter

Alice.
from Nora and Neil
January 19

Alice Francoeur

Winning the Wilderness

This One

UTTF-UWB-TF1A

In all the story of the world of man,
Who blazed the way to greater, better things?
Who stopped the long migration of wild men,
And set the noble task of building human homes?
The learned recluse? The forum teacher?
The poet-singer? The soldier, voyager,
Or ruler? 'T was none of this proud line.
The man who digged the ground foretold the destiny
Of men. 'T was he made anchor for the heart;
Gave meaning to the hearthstone, and the birthplace,
And planted vine and figtree at the door.
He made e'en nations possible. Aye, when
With his stone axe he made a hoe, he carved,
Unwittingly, the scepter of the world.
The steps by which the multitudes have climbed
Were all rough-hewn by this base implement.
In its rude path have followed all the minor
Arts of men. Hark back along the centuries,
And hear its march across the continents.
From zone to zone, all 'round the bounteous world,
The man whose skill makes rich the barren field
And causes grass to grow, and flowers to blow,
And fruits to ripen, and grain turn to gold—
That man is King! Long live the King!

—Mrs. J. K. Hudson.

They sought the trail and followed it westward
in the face of the wind

WINNING THE WILDERNESS

BY

MARGARET HILL McCARTER

Author of "The Price of the Prairie," "A Wall of Men," "The Peace of the Solomon Valley," "A Master's Degree," etc.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

J. N. MARCHAND

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To

THAT FARMER FATHER AND MOTHER

WITH THEIR HANDS ON TODAY

BUT WITH THEIR EYES ON TOMORROW

WHO THROUGH LABOR AND LONELINESS AND

HOPES LONG DEFERRED

HAVE WON A DESERT TO FRUITFULNESS

A WILDERNESS TO BEAUTY

FOREWORD

A REACH of level prairie bounded only by the edge of the world — misty ravelings of heliotrope and amber, covered only by the arch of heaven — blue, beautiful and pitiless in its far fathomless spaces. To the southwest a triple fold of deeper purple on the horizon line — mere hint of commanding headlands thitherward. Across the face of the prairie streams wandering through shallow clefts, aimlessly, somewhere toward the southeast; their course secured by gentle swells breaking into sheer low bluffs on the side next to the water, or by groups of cottonwood trees and wild plum bushes along their right of way. And farther off the brown indefinite shadowings of half-tamed sand dunes. Aside from these things, a featureless landscape — just grassy ground down here and blue cloud-splashed sky up there.

The last Indian trail had disappeared. The hoofprints of cavalry horses had faded away. The price had been paid for the prairie — the costly measure of death and daring. But the prairie itself, in its loneliness and loveliness, was still unsubdued. Through the fury of the winter's blizzard, the glory of the springtime, the brown wastes of burning midsummer, the long autumn, with its soft sweet air, its opal skies, and the land a dream of splendor which the far mirage reflects and the wide horizon frames in a curtain of exquisite amethyst — through none of these was the prairie subdued. Only to the coming of that king whose scepter is the hoe, did soul of the soil awake to life and promise. To him the wilderness gave up everything except its beauty and the sweep of the freedom-breathing winds that still inspire it.

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They sought the trail and followed it westward in the face of the wind . . . . . *Frontispiece*

"Read these," she said, "then promise me that in the hour when Leigh needs my help you will let me help her" 166

"It's a friendly act on somebody's part," he said grimly 180

Leigh turned to see Thaine Aydelot looking down at her as he leaned over the high back of the rustic seat . 274

PART ONE

THE FATHER

The old Antaean fable of strength renewed from the ground
Was a human truth for the ages; since the hour of the Eden-birth.
That man among men was strongest who stood with his feet on the earth!

—SHARLOT M. HALL.

Winning the Wilderness

CHAPTER I

The Blessing of Asher

> Unless there be in the background a mother, no portrait of a man is complete.
>
> —Winston Churchill.

THE old Aydelot farm reached quite down to the little village of Cloverdale, from which it was separated by Clover Creek. But the Aydelot farmhouse stood a good half-mile away up the National pike road toward the Virginia state line. The farm consisted of two long narrow strips of ground, bordering the road on either side and walled about by forests hiding stagnant marshes in their black-shadowed depths. Francis Aydelot had taken up the land from the government before the townsite was thought of. Farming was not to his liking and his house had been an inn, doing a thriving business with travelers going out along that great National highway in ante-railway days. But when the village took root and grew into a little town, the village tavern absorbed the revenue from the traveling public, and Francis Aydelot had, perforce, to put his own hands to the plow and earn a living from the land. It was never a labor of love with him, however, and although he grew well-to-do in the tilling, he resented the touch of the soil as something degrading.

Cloverdale did not grow toward him, because, out of prejudice at its being, he would not sell one foot of his ground for town lot purposes. Nevertheless, since he was upright in all his dealings, the villagers grew proud of him, deferred to his judgment, quoted his opinions, and rated him generally the biggest asset of the community, with one exception. That exception was young Asher Aydelot, a pink-cheeked, gray-eyed boy, only son of the House of Aydelot and heir to all the long narrow acres from the wooded crest on the east to the clear waters of Clover Creek on the west. He was heir to more than these, however, if the heritage of ancestry counts for anything.

Jean Aydelot, the first of the name in America, driven from France by his family on account of his Huguenot beliefs, had settled in Virginia. He had quickly grasped the American ideals of freedom, the while he affiliated easily with the exclusive English Cavaliers. Something of the wanderlust in his blood, however, kept him from rooting too firmly at once. It happened that when a band of Quaker exiles had sought refuge in Virginia and was about to be driven out by the autocratic Cavaliers, young Aydelot, out of love for a Quaker girl, had championed their cause vehemently. And he was so influential in the settlement that he might have succeeded, but for one family — the wealthy and aristocratic Thaines. Through the son of this family the final expulsion of these Quakers was accomplished. The woman in the case was Mercy Pennington, a pretty Quakeress with whom young Jerome Thaine fell in love, promising protection to all her people in return for her hand. When she refused his offer, the Thaines carried the day, and the Quakers again became

exiles. Jean Aydelot followed them to Pennsylvania and married Mercy Pennington, who was promptly disowned by the Quaker Church for this marriage to one outside its membership.

In spite of all this heresy, however, the Aydelots became one of the leading families in the development of the colonies. Their descendants fell heir to the traits of their French-English forbears: freedom of belief, courage to follow a cause, a touch of the wanderlust, the mercurial French mind, and the steady poise of the followers of the Inward Light. A trace of bitterness had come down the years, however, with the family history; a feud-like resentment against the family of Jerome Thaine of Virginia.

Francis Aydelot had crossed the Alleghanies and settled in Ohio in frontier days. Here his life, like his narrow, woods-bound farm, was clean and open but narrowed by surroundings and lack of opportunity. What had made for freedom and reform in his ancestors, in him became prejudice and stubborn will. Mrs. Aydelot was a broad-minded woman. Something of vision was in her clear gray eyes. Love of beauty, respect for learning, and an almost statesman-like grasp of civic duty and the trend of national progress were hers, too.

From such ancestry came Asher Aydelot, the healthiest, happiest country boy that ever waked the echoes of the old Ohio woodlands, or dared the currents of her mad little rivers, or whistled fearlessly as he scampered down the dusty pike road in the soft black summer nights.

Asher was just fifteen when the Civil War swept the nation off its feet. The Quaker spirit of Mercy Pennington made fighting repulsive to his father, but in Asher the

old Huguenot courage of Jean Aydelot blazed forth, together with the rash partisanship of a young hot-blood whose life has been hemmed in too narrowly by forest walls. Almost before Cloverdale knew there was a war, the Third Ohio Regiment was on its way to the front. Among its bearded men was one beardless youth, a round-faced drummer boy of fifteen, the only child of the big farmhouse beside the National road. In company with him was his boyhood chum, Jim Shirley, son of the Cloverdale tavern keeper.

An April sun was slipping behind the treetops, and the twilight mists were already rising above the creek. Francis Aydelot and his wife sat on the veranda watching Asher in the glory of a military suit and brass buttons coming up the pike with springing step.

"How strong he is! I'm glad he is at home again," the mother was saying.

"Yes, he's here to stay at last. I have his plans all settled," Francis Aydelot declared.

"But, Francis, a man must make some plans for himself. Asher may not agree," Mrs. Aydelot spoke earnestly.

"How can our boy know as well as his father does what is best for him? He must agree, that's all. We have gone over this matter often enough together. I won't have any Jim Shirley in my family. He's gone away and nobody knows where he is, just when his father needs him to take the care of the tavern off his hands."

"What made Jim go away from Cloverdale?" Mrs. Aydelot asked.

"Nobody seems to know exactly. He left just before his brother, Tank, married that Leigh girl up the Clover

valley somewhere. But everything's settled for Asher. He will be marrying one of the Cloverdale girls pretty soon and stay right here in town. We'll take it up with him now. There's no use waiting."

"And yet I wish we might wait till he speaks of it himself. Remember, he's been doing his own thinking in the time he's been away," the mother insisted.

Just then, Asher reached the corner of the door yard. Catching sight of the two, he put his hands on the top of the paling fence, leaped lightly over it, and came across to the veranda, where he sat down on the top step.

"Just getting in from town? The place hasn't changed much, has it?" the father declared.

"No, not much," Asher replied absently, looking out with unseeing eyes at the lengthening woodland shadows, "a church or two more, some brick sidewalk, and a few stores and homes — just added on, not improved. I miss Jim Shirley everywhere. The older folks seem the same, but some of the girls are pushing baby-carriages and the boys are getting round-shouldered and droopy-jawed."

He drew himself up with military steadiness as he spoke.

"Well, you are glad to settle down anyhow," his father responded. "The old French spirit of roving and adventure has had its day with you, and now you will begin your life work."

"Yes, I'm done with fighting." Asher's lips tightened. "But what do you call my life work, father?"

It was the eighth April after the opening of the Civil War. Asher had just come home from two years of army service on the western plains. Few changes had come to the little community; but to the young man, who eight

springtimes ago had gone out as a pink-cheeked drummer boy, the years had been full of changes. He was now twenty-three, straight as an Indian, lean and muscular as a veteran soldier. The fair, round cheeks of boyhood were brown and tinged with red-blooded health. There was something resolute and patient in the clear gray eyes, as if the mother's own far vision had crept into them. But the ready smile that had made the Cloverdale community love the boy broke as quickly now on the man's face, giving promise that his saving sense of humor and his good nature would be factors to reckon with in every combat.

Asher had staid in the ranks till the end of the war, had been wounded, captured, and imprisoned; had fought through a hospital fever and narrowly escaped death in the front of many battle lines. But he did not ask for a furlough, nor account his duty done till the war was ended. Just before that time, when he was sick in a Southern prison, a rebel girl had walked into his life to stay forever. With his chum, Jim Shirley, he had chafed through two years in a little eastern college, the while bigger things seemed calling him to action. At the end of the second year, he broke away, and joining the regular army, began the hazardous life of a Plains scout.

Two years of fighting a foe from every way the winds blow, cold and hunger, storms and floods and desert heat, poisonous reptiles, poisoned arrows of Indians, and the deadly Asiatic cholera; sometimes with brave comrades, sometimes with brutal cowards, sometimes on scout duty, utterly and awfully alone; over miles on endless miles of grassy level prairies, among cruel canyons, in dreary sand lands where men die of thirst, monotonous and maddening

in their barren, eternal sameness; and sometimes, between sunrises of superb grandeur, and sunsets of sublime glory, over a land of exquisite virgin loveliness — it is small wonder that the ruddy cheeks were bronze as an Indian's, that the roundness of boyhood had given place to the muscular strength of manhood, that the gray eyes should hold something of patience and endurance and of a vision larger than the Cloverdale neighborhood might understand.

When Asher had asked, "What do you call my life work, Father?" something impenetrable was in his direct gaze.

Francis Aydelot deliberated before replying. Then the decisive tone and firm set of the mouth told what resistance to his will might cost.

"It may not seem quite homelike at first, but you will soon find a wife and that always settles a man. I can trust you to pick the best there is here. As to your work, it must be something fit for a gentleman, and that's not grubbing in the ground. Of course, this is Aydelot soil. It couldn't belong to anybody else. I never would sell a foot of it to Cloverdale to let the town build this way. I'd as soon sell to a Thaine from Virginia as I'd sell to that town."

He waved a hand toward the fields shut in by heavy woodlands, where the shadows were already black. After a moment he continued:

"Everything is settled for you, Asher. I've been pretty careful and lucky, too, in some ways. The men who didn't go to war had the big chances at money making, you know. While you were off fighting, I was improving the time here. I've done it fairly, though. I never dodged a law in my

life, nor met a man into whose eyes I couldn't look squarely."

As he spoke, the blood left Asher's cheeks and his face grew gray under the tan.

"Father, do you think a man who fights for his country is to be accounted below the man who stays at home and makes money?"

"Well, he certainly can do more for his children than some of those who went to this war can do for their fathers," Francis Aydelot declared. "Suppose I was helpless and poor now, what could you do for me?"

There was no attempt at reply, and the father went on: "I have prepared your work for you. You must begin it at once. Years ago Cloverdale set up a hotel, a poor enough tavern even for those days, but it robbed me of the patronage this house had before that time, and I had to go to farming. Every kind of drudgery I've had to do here. Cutting down forests, and draining swamps is a back-breaking business. I never could forgive the founders for stopping by Clover Creek, when they might have gone twenty miles further on where a town was needed and left me here. But that's all past now. I've improved the time. I have a good share of stock in the bank and I own the only hotel in Cloverdale. I closed with Shirley as soon as I heard you were coming home. Shirley's getting old, and since Jim has gone there's no one to help him and take his place later, so he sold at a very good figure. He had to sell for some reason, I believe. The Shirleys are having some family trouble that I don't understand nor care about. You've always been a sort of idol in the town anyhow. Now that you are to go into the Shirley House

as proprietor I suppose Cloverdale will take it as a dispensation of Providence in their favor, and you can live like a gentleman."

"But, father, I've always liked the country best. Don't you remember how Jim Shirley was always out here instead of my going down town when we were boys?"

"You are only a boy, now, Asher, and this is all I'll hear to your doing. You ought to be thankful for having such a chance open to you. I have leased the farm for five years and you don't want to be a hired man at twenty dollars a month, I reckon. Of course, the farm will be yours some day, unless you take a notion to run off to Virginia and marry a Thaine."

The last words were said jokingly, but Asher's mother saw a sudden hardening of the lines of his face as he sat looking out at the darkening landscape.

There was only a faint glow in the west now. The fields toward Cloverdale were wrapped in twilight shadows. Behind the eastern treetops the red disk of the rising moon was half revealed. Asher Aydelot waited long before he spoke. At length, he turned toward his father with a certain stiffening of his form, and each felt a space widening gulf-wise between them.

"You stayed at home and grew rich, Father."

"Well?"

The father's voice cut like a steel edge. He saw only opposition to his will here, but the mother forecasted the end from that moment.

"Father, war gives us to see bigger things than hatred between two sections of the country. There is education in it, too. That is a part of the compensation. Once, when

our regiment was captured and starving, the Fifty-fourth Virginia boys saved our lives by feeding us the best supper I ever tasted. And a Rebel girl—" he broke off suddenly.

"Well, what of all this? What are you trying to say?" queried the older man.

"I'm trying to show you that I cannot sit down here in the Shirley House and play mine host any more than I could—" hesitatingly—"marry a Cloverdale girl on demand. No Cloverdale girl would have me so. I've seen too much of the country for such a position, Father. Let the men who staid at home do the little jobs."

He had not meant to say all this, but the stretch of boundless green prairies was before his eyes, the memory of heroic action where men utterly forget themselves was in his mind, making life in that little Ohio settlement seem only a boy's pastime, to be put away with other childish things. While night and day, in the battle clamor, in the little college class room, on boundless prairie billows, among lonely sand dunes—everywhere, he carried the memory of the gentle touch of the hand of a rebel girl, who had visited him when he was sick and in prison. And withal, he resented dictation, as all the Aydelots and Penningtons before him had done.

"What do you propose to do?" his father asked.

"I don't know yet what I can do. I only know what I cannot do."

"And that is—?"

"Just what I have said. I cannot be a tavern keeper here the rest of my days with nothing to do half of the time except to watch the men pitch horseshoes behind the blacksmith shop, and listen to the flies buzz in the windows

on summer afternoons; and everything else so quiet and dead you don't know whether you are on the street or in the graveyard. If you'd ever crossed the Mississippi River you'd understand why."

"Well, I haven't, and I don't understand. But the only way to stop this roving is to make a home of your own. Will you tell me how you expect to support a Cloverdale girl when you marry one?"

"I don't expect to marry one." The smile was winning, but the son's voice sounded dangerously like the father's.

"Why not?"

"Because when I marry it will be to a southern girl—" Asher hesitated a moment. When he went on, his voice was not as son to father, but as man to man.

"It all happened down in Virginia, when I was wounded and in prison. This little girl took care of me. Only a soldier really knows what a woman's hand means in sickness. But she did more. She risked everything, even her life, to get letters through the lines to you and to get me exchanged. I shiver yet when I think of her, disguised as a man in soldier's clothes, taking the chance she did for me. And, well, I left my heart down there. That's all."

"Why haven't you ever told us this before, Asher?" his father asked.

Asher stood up where the white moonlight fell full on his face. Somehow the old Huguenot defiance and the old Quaker endurance of his ancestors seemed all expressed in him.

"I wasn't twenty-one, then, and I have nothing yet to offer a girl by way of support," he said.

"Why, Asher!" Mrs. Aydelot exclaimed, "you have everything here."

"Not yet, mother," he replied. "And I haven't told you because her name is Virginia Thaine, and she is a descendant of Jerome Thaine. Are the Aydelots big enough to bury old hates?"

Francis Aydelot sat moveless as a statue. When at length he spoke, there was no misunderstanding his meaning.

"You have no means by which to earn a living. You will go down to town and take charge of the Shirley House at once, or go to work as a hired hand here. But remember this: from the day you marry a Thaine of Virginia you are no longer my son. Family ties, family honor, respect for your forefathers forbid it."

He rose without more words, and went into the house.

Then came the mother's part.

"Sit down, Asher," she said, and Asher dropped to his place on the step.

"We don't seem to see life through the same spectacles," he said calmly. "Am I wrong, mother? Nobody can choose my life for me, nor my wife, either. Didn't old grandfather, Jean Aydelot, leave his home in France, and didn't grandmother, Mercy Pennington, marry to suit her own choice?"

Even in the shadow, his mother noted the patient expression of the gray eyes looking up at her.

"Asher, it is Aydelot tradition to be determined and self-willed, and the bitterness against Jerome Thaine and his descendants has never left the blood — till now."

She stroked his hair lovingwise, as mothers will ever do.

"Do you suppose father will ever change?"

"I don't believe he will. We have talked of this many times, and he will listen to nothing else. He grows more set in his notions as we all do with years, unless—"

"Well, you don't, mother. Unless what?" Asher asked.

"Unless we think broadly as the years broaden out toward old age. But, Asher, what are your plans?"

"I'm afraid I have none yet. You know I was a farmer boy until I was fifteen, a soldier boy till I was nineteen, a college student for two years, and a Plains scout for two years more. Tell me, mother, what does all this fit me for? Not for a tavern in a town of less than a thousand people."

He sat waiting, his elbow resting on his knee, his chin supported by his closed hand.

"Asher, when you left school and went out West, I foresaw what has happened tonight," Mrs. Aydelot began. "I tried to prepare your father for it, but he would not listen, would not understand. He doesn't yet. He never will. But I do. You will not stay in Ohio always, because you do not fit in here now. Newer states keep calling you westward, westward. This was frontier when we came here in the thirties; we belong here. But, sooner or later, you will put your life into the building of the West. Something—the War or the Plains, or may be this Virginia Thaine, has left you too big for prejudice. You will go sometime where there is room to think and live as you believe."

"Mother, may I go? I dream of it night and day. I'm so cramped here. The woods are in my way. I can't see a

mile. I want to see to the edge of the world, as I can on the prairies. A man can win a kingdom out there."

He was facing her now, his whole countenance aglow with bright anticipation.

"There is only one way to win that kingdom," Mrs. Aydelot declared. "The man who takes hold of the plow-handles is the man who will really conquer the prairies. His scepter is not the rifle, but the hoe."

For all his life, Asher Aydelot never forgot his mother's face, nor the sound of her low prophetic words on that moonlit night on the shadowy veranda of his childhood home.

"You are right, mother. I don't want to fight any more. It must be the soil that is calling me back to the West, the big, big West! And I mean to go when the time comes. I hope it will come soon, and I know you will give me your blessing then."

His mother's hands were pressed lovingly upon his forehead, as he leaned against her knee.

"My blessing, and more than mine. The blessing of Moses to Asher of old, as well. 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be. The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.'"

She bent over her boy, and pushing back the hair from his forehead, she kissed it reverently, nor dreamed in how many a bitter strife would the memory of this sacred hour come back to him, with the blessed note of victory.

The next morning Asher put on his working clothes and began the life of a hired man on his father's farm. The summer was long and hot, and in the late August the dread

typhoid malaria swept up from the woods marshes. It was of virulent form and soon had its way with Asher's father and mother.

When the will of Francis Aydelot was read in court, the inexorable will of a stubborn man, it declared that the Cloverdale Hotel, the bank stock, and the farm with all the appurtenances thereunto pertaining, should descend to Asher Aydelot, provided he should remain a resident of Ohio and should never be united in marriage to any descendant of Jerome Thaine of the State of Virginia. Failing in this, all the property, except a few hundred dollars in cash, should descend to one Jane Aydelot, of Philadelphia, and her heirs and assigns forever; provided these heirs were not the children of Virginia Thaine of the state of Virginia.

On the same day, Asher wrote to one Jane Aydelot, of Philadelphia, to come to Ohio and take possession of her property. Then he carefully sodded the two mounds in the graveyard, and planted old-fashioned sweet pinks upon them, and bidding good-by to the home of his boyhood, he turned his face hopefully to the West.

CHAPTER II

The Sign of the Sunflower

Little they knew what wealth untold
Lay hid where the desolate prairies rolled:
Who would have dared, with brush or pen,
As this land is now, to paint it then?
—Allerton.

THE trail had left the woodland far to the eastward, and wound its way over broad prairie billows, past bluffy-banked streams, along crests of low watersheds, until at last it slid down into an open endlessness of the Lord's earth — just a vasty bigness of landstuff seemingly left over when geography-making was done. It was untamed stuff, too, whereon one man's marking was like to the track of foam in the wake of one ship in mid-ocean. Upon its face lay the trail, broad and barren of growth as the dusty old National pike road making its way across uplands and valleys of Ohio. But this was the only likeness. The pike was a gravel-built, upgraded highway, bordered by little rail-fenced fields and deep forests hiding malarial marshes in the lower places.

This trail, flat along the ungraded ground, tended in the direction of least resistance, generally toward the southwest. It was bounded by absence of landmarks, boulder or tree or cliff. Along either side of it was a fringe of spindling sunflower stalks, with their blooms of gold marking two gleaming threads across the plains far toward the misty nothingness of the western horizon.

The mid-September day had been intensely hot, but the light air was beginning to flow a bit refreshingly out of the sky. A gray cloud-wave, creeping tide-like up from the southwest, was tempering the afternoon glare. In all the landscape the only object to hold the eye was a prairie schooner drawn by a team of hard-mouthed little Indian ponies, and followed by a free-limbed black mare of the Kentucky blue blood.

Asher Aydelot sat on the wagon seat holding the reins. Beside him was his wife, a young, girlish-looking woman with large dark eyes, abundant dark hair, a straight, aristocratic nose, and well-formed mouth and chin.

The two, coming in from the East on the evening before, had reached the end of the stage line, where Asher's team and wagon was waiting for them.

The outfit moved slowly. It had left Carey's Crossing at early dawn and had put twenty-five miles between itself and that last outpost of civilization.

"Why don't you let the horses trot down this hill slope, Asher?" The woman's voice had the soft accent of the South.

"Are you tired, Virgie?" Asher Aydelot looked earnestly down at his wife.

"Not a bit!" The bright smile and vigorous lift of the shoulders were assuring.

"Then we won't hurry. We have several miles to go yet. It is a long day's run from Carey's to our claim. Wolf County is almost like a state. The Crossing hopes to become the county seat."

"Why do they call that place Carey's Crossing?" Mrs. Aydelot asked.

"It was a trading post once where the north and south

trail crossed the main trail. Later it was a rallying place for cavalry. Now it's our postoffice," Asher explained.

"I mean, why call it Carey? I knew Careys back in Virginia."

"It is named for a young doctor, the only one in ten thousand miles, so far as I know."

"And his family?" Virginia asked.

"He's a bachelor, I believe. By the way, we aren't going down hill. We are on level ground."

Mrs. Aydelot leaned out beyond the wagon bows to take in the trail behind them.

"Why, we are right in a big saucer. All the land slopes to the center down there before us. Can't you see it?"

"No, I've seen it too often. It is just a trick of the plains — one of the many tricks for the eye out here. Look at the sunflowers, Virgie. Don't you love them?"

Virginia Aydelot nestled close to her husband's side and put one hand on his. It was a little hand, white and soft, the hand of a lady born of generations of gentility. The hand it rested on was big and hard and brown and very strong looking.

"I've always loved them since the day you sent me the little one in a letter," she said in a low voice, as if some one might overhear. "I thought you had forgotten me and the old war days. I wasn't very happy then." There was a quiver of the lip that hinted at the memory of intense sorrow. "I had gone up to the spring in that cool little glen in the mountain behind our home, you know, when a neighbor's servant boy, Bo Peep, Boanerges Peeperville, he named himself, came grinning round a big rock ledge with

your letter. Just a crushed little sunflower and a sticky old card, the deuce of hearts. I knew it was from you, and I loved the sunflower for telling me so. Were you near here then? This land looks so peaceful and beautiful to me, and homelike somehow, as if we should find some neighbors just over the hill that you say isn't there."

"Neither the hill nor the neighbors, yet, although settlers will be coming soon. We won't be lonesome very long, I'm sure."

Asher shifted the reins to his other hand and held the little white fingers close.

"It wasn't anywhere near here. It was away off in the southwest corner of — nowhere. I was going to say a shorter word, for that's where we were. I took that card out of an old deck from the man nearest me. The Comanches had fixed him, so he didn't need it in his game any more. There were only two of us left, a big half-breed Cheyenne scout and myself. I picked the sunflower from the only stalk within a hundred miles of there. I guess it grew so far from everything just for me that day. Weak as I was, I'll never forget how hopefully it seemed to look at me. The envelope was one mother had sent me, you remember. I told the Cheyenne how to start it to you from the fort. He left me there, wounded and alone — 'twas all he could do — while he went for help about a thousand miles away it must have seemed, even to an Indian. I thought it was my last message to you, dearie, for I never expected to be found alive; but I was, and when you wrote back, sending your letter to 'The Sign of the Sunflower,' Oh, little girl, the old trail blossom was glorified for me forever."

He broke off so suddenly that his wife looked up inquiringly.

"I was thinking of the cool spring and the rocks, and that shady glen, and the mountains, and the trees, and the well-kept mansion houses, and servants like Bo Peep to fetch and carry — and here — Virginia, why did you let me persuade you away from them? Everything was made ready for you there. The Lord didn't do anything for this country but go off and leave it to us."

"Yes, to us. Here is the sunflower and the new home in the new West and Asher Aydelot. And underfoot is the prairie sod that is ours, and overhead is heaven that kept watch over you for me, and over both of us for this. And I persuaded you to bring me here because I wanted to be with you always."

"You can face it all for me?" he asked.

"With you, you mean. Yes, for we'll stop at 'The Sign of the Sunflower' so long as we both shall live. How beautiful they are, these endless bands of gold, drawing us on and on across the plains. Asher, you forget that Virginia is not as it was before the war. But we did keep inherited pride in the Thaine family, and the will to do as we pleased. You see what has pleased me."

"And it shall please me to make such a fortune out of this ground, and build such a home for you that by and by you will forget you ever were without the comforts you are giving up now," Asher declared, looking equal to the task. "Virgie," he added presently, "on the night my mother told me to come out West she gave me her blessing, and the blessing of the old Bible Asher also — 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be.'

I believe the blessing will stay with us; that the Eternal God will be our refuge in this new West and new home-building."

They rode awhile in silence. Then Asher said:

"Look yonder, Virginia, south of the trail. Just a faint yellow line."

"Is it another trail, or are you lost and beginning to see things?"

"No, I'm found," Asher replied. "We scattered those seeds ourselves; did it on Sundays when I was living on my claim, waiting till I could go back and bring you here. We blazed the way, marked it with gold, I'd better say; a line clear to Grass River. It leaves the real Sunflower Trail right here."

"Who were *we* in this planting?" Virginia asked.

"Oh, me and my first wife, Jim Shirley, and his shepherd dog, Pilot. Jim and I have done several things together besides that. We were boys together back in Cloverdale. We went to the war together to fight you obstreperous Rebels." There was a twinkle in Asher's eyes now.

"Yes, but in the end who really won?" Virginia asked demurely.

"You did, of course—in my case. Jim went back to Cloverdale for awhile. Then he came out here. He's a fine fellow. Plants a few more seeds by the wayside than is good for him, maybe, but a friend to the last rollcall. He was quite a ladies' man once, and nobody knows but himself how much he would have loved a home. He has something of a story back of his coming West, but we never speak of that. He's our only neighbor now."

It was twilight when Asher and his wife slipped down

over a low swell and reached their home. The afterglow of sunset was gorgeous in the west. The gray cloud-tide, now a purple sea, was rifted by billows of flame. Level mist-folds of pale violet lay along the prairie distances. In the southwest the horizon line was broken by a triple fold of deepest blue-black tones, the mark of headlands somewhere. Across the landscape a grassy outline marked the course of a stream that wandered dimly toward the darkening night shadows. The subdued tones of evening held all the scene, save where a group of tall sunflowers stood up to catch the last light of day full on their golden shields.

"We are here at last, Mrs. Aydelot. Welcome to our neighborhood!" Asher said bravely as the team halted.

Virginia sat still on the wagon seat, taking in the view of sunset sky and twilight prairie.

"This is our home," she murmured. "I'm glad we are here."

"I'm glad you are glad. I hope I haven't misrepresented it to you," her husband responded, turning away that he might not see her face just then.

It was a strange place to call home, especially to one whose years had been spent mainly in the pretty mountain-walled Virginia valleys where cool brooks babbled over pebbly beds or splashed down in crystal waterfalls; whose childhood home had been an old colonial house with driveways, and pillared verandas, and jessamine-wreathed windows; with soft carpets and cushioned chairs, and candelabra whose glittering pendants reflected the light in prismatic tintings; and everywhere the lazy ease of idle servants and unhurried lives.

The little sod house, nestled among sheltering sunflowers,

stood on a slight rise of ground. It contained one room with two windows, one looking to the east and the other to the west, and a single door opening on the south. Above this door was a smooth pine board bearing the inscription, "Sunflower Inn," stained in rather artistic lettering. A low roof extending over the doorway gave semblance to a porch which some scorched vines had vainly tried to decorate. There was a rude seat made of a goods box beside the doorway. Behind the house rose the low crest of a prairie billow, hardly discernible on the level plains. Before it lay the endless prairie across which ran the now half-dry, grass-choked stream. A few stunted cottonwood trees followed its windings, and one little clump of wild plum bushes bristled in a draw leading down to the shallow place of the dry watercourse. All else was distance and vastness void of life and utter loneliness.

Virginia Aydelot looked at the scene before her. Then she turned to her husband with a smile on her young face, saying again,

"I am glad I am here."

There is one chord that every woman's voice touches some time, no matter what her words may be. As Virginia spoke, Asher saw again the moonlight on the white pillars of the south veranda of the old Aydelot farmhouse, and his mother sitting in the shadows; and again he caught the tone of her voice saying,

"Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be."

He leaped from the wagon seat and put up his arms to help his wife to the ground.

"This is the end of the trail," he said gaily. "We have

reached the inn with 'The Sign of the Sunflower.' See the signboard Jim has put up for us."

At that moment a big shepherd dog came bounding out of the weeds by the river and leaped toward them with joyous yelps; a light shone through the doorway, and a voice at once deep and pleasant to the ear, called out:

"Well, here you are, just as supper is ready. Present me to the bride, Asher, and then I'll take the stock off your hands."

"Mrs. Aydelot, this is Mr. James Shirley, at present the leading artistic house decorator as well as corn king of the Southwest. Allow me, Jim, to present my wife. You two ought to like each other if each of you can stand me."

They shook hands cordially, and each took the other's measure at a glance. What Shirley saw was a small, well-dressed woman whose charm was a positive force. It was not merely that she was well-bred and genial of manner, nor that for many reasons she was pretty and would always be pretty, even with gray hair and wrinkles. There was something back of all this; something definite to build on; a self-reliance and unbreakable determination without the spirit that antagonizes.

"A thoroughbred," was Shirley's mental comment. "The manners of a lady and the will of a winner."

What Virginia saw was a big, broad-shouldered man, tanned to the very limit of brownness, painfully clean shaven, and grotesquely clean in dress; a white shirt, innocent of bluing in its laundry, a glistening celluloid collar, a black necktie (the last two features evidently just added to the toilet, and neither as yet set to their service), dark pantaloons and freshly blacked shoes. But it was Shirley's

face that caught Virginia's eyes, for even with the tan it was a handsome face, with regular features, and blue eyes seeing life deeply rather than broadly. Just a hint of the artistic, however, took away from rather than added to the otherwise manly expression. Clearly, Jim Shirley was a man that men and women, too, must love if they cared for him at all. And they couldn't help caring for him. He had too much of the quality of eternal interest.

"I'm glad to meet you, and I bid you welcome to your new home, Mrs. Aydelot. The house is in order and supper is ready. I congratulate you, Asher," he said, as he turned away to take the ponies.

"You will come in and eat with us," Virginia said cordially.

"Not tonight. I must put this stock away and hurry home."

Asher opened his lips to repeat his wife's invitation, but something in Jim's face held the words, so he merely nodded a good-by as he led his wife into the sod cabin.

Two decades in Kansas saw hundreds of such cabins on the plains. The walls of this one were nearly two feet thick and smoothly plastered inside with a gypsum product, giving an ivory-yellow finish, smooth and hard as bone. There was no floor but the bare earth into which a nail could scarcely have been driven. The furniture was meager and plain. There was only one picture on the wall, the sweet face of Asher's mother. A bookshelf held a Bible with two or three other volumes, some newspapers and a magazine. Sundry surprising little devices showed the inventive skill of the home-builder, but it was all home-made and unpainted. It must have been the eyes of love that made this

place seem home-like to these young people whose early environment had been so vastly different in everything!

Jim Shirley had a supper of fried ham, stewed wild plums, baked sweet potatoes, and hot coffee, with canned peaches and some hard little cookies. Surely the Lord meant men to be the cooks. Society started wrong in the kitchen, for the average man prepares a better meal with less of effort and worry than the average or super-average woman will ever do. It was not the long ride alone, it was this appetizing food that made that first meal in the sod mansion one that these two remembered in days of different fortune. They remembered, too, the bunch of sunflowers that adorned the table that night. The vase was the empty peach can wrapped round with a piece of newspaper.

As they lingered at their meal, Asher glanced through the little west window and saw Jim Shirley sitting by the clump of tall sunflowers not far away watching them with the eager face of a lonely man. A big white-throated Scotch collie lay beside him, waiting patiently for his master to start for home.

"I am glad Jim has Pilot," Asher thought. "A dog is better than no company at all. I wish he had a wife. Poor lonely fellow!"

Half an hour later the two came outside to the seat by the doorway. The moon was filling the sky with its radiance. A chorus of crickets sang joyously in the short brown grass about the sunflowers. The cottonwoods along the river course gleamed like alabaster in the white night-splendor, and the prairie breeze sang its low crooning song of evening as it flowed gently over the land.

"How beautiful the world is," Virginia said, as she caught the full radiance of the light on the prairie.

"Is this beautiful to you, Virgie?" Asher asked, as he drew her close to him. "I've seen these plains when they seemed just plain hell to me, full of every kind of danger: cholera, poison, cold, hunger, heat, hostile Indian, and awful loneliness. And yet, the very fascination of the thing called me back and hardened me to it all. But why? What is there here on these Kansas prairies to hold me here and make me want to bring you here, too? Not a feature of this land is like the home country in Virginia. When the Lord gave Adam and Eve a tryout in the Garden of Eden, He gave them everything with which to start the world off right. Out here we doubt sometimes if there is any God west of the Missouri River. He didn't leave any timber for shelter, nor wood, nor coal for fuel, nor fruit, nor nuts, nor roots, nor water for the dry land. All there is of this piece of the Lord's leftovers is just the prairie down here, and the sky over it. And it's so big I wonder sometimes that there is even enough skystuff to cover it. And yet, it is beautiful and maddening in its hold, once it gets you. Why?"

"Maybe it is the very unconquerableness that cries out to the love of power in you. Maybe the Lord, who knew how easily Adam let Eden slip through his fingers, decided that on the other side of the world He would give a younger race of men, a fire-tried race in battle, the chance to make their own Eden. So He left the stuff here for such as you and me to picture out our own plan and then work to the pattern. It is the real land of promise. Everything waiting to be done here."

"And there's only one way to do it. I am sure of that," Asher replied. "Armies don't win, they terrorize and destroy. We whipped back the Indians out here; they'd come again, if they dared — but they never will," he added quickly, as he saw his wife's face whiten in the moonlight. "It's a struggle to win the soil, with loneliness and distance and a few thousand other things to fight, beside. But I told you all this before I asked you to come out here."

"I wish I could have brought some property to you to help you, Asher, but you know how the Thaine estate was reduced."

"Yes, I helped the family to that," Asher replied.

"Well, I seem to have helped you to lose the Aydelot inheritance. We are starting neck and neck out here," Virginia cried, "and we'll win. I can see our plantation — ranch, you call it — now, with groves and a little lake and a big ranch house, and just acres of wheat and meadows, and red clover and fine stock and big barns, and you and me, the peers of a proud countryside when we have really conquered. 'Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree.' Isn't that the promise?"

"Oh, Virgie, any man could win a kingdom with a wife like you," Asher said tenderly. "Back in Ohio, when I grubbed the fence corners, I saw this country night and day, waiting for us here, and I wondered why the folks were willing to let the marshes down in the deep woods stagnate and breed malaria, and then fight the fever with calomel and quinine every summer, instead of opening the woodland and draining the swamps. Nevertheless, I've left enough money in the Cloverdale bank to take you back East

and start up some little sort of a living there, if you find you cannot stay here. I couldn't bring you here and burn all the bridges. All you have to do is to say you want to go back, and you can go."

"You are very good, Asher." His wife's voice was low and soft. "But I don't want to go back. Not until we have failed here. And we shall not fail."

And together that night on the far unconquered plains of Kansas, with the moon shining down upon them, these two, so full of hope and courage, planned their future. In the cottonwood trees by the river sands a night bird twittered sleepily to its mate; the chirp of many crickets in the short grass below the sunflowers had dwindled to a mere note at intervals. The soft breeze caressed the two young faces, then wandered far and far across the lonely land, and in its long low-breathed call to the night there was a sigh of sadness.

CHAPTER III

The Will of the Wind

Naught but the endless hills, dim and far and blue,
And sighing wind, and sailing cloud, and nobody here but you.
—James W. Steele.

THE next day, and for many days following, the wind blew; fiercely and unceasingly it blew, carrying every movable thing before it. Whatever was tending in its direction, it helped over the ground amazingly. Whatever tried to move in the face of it had to fight for every inch of the way. It whipped all the gold from the sunflowers and threshed them mercilessly about. It snapped the slender stems of the big, bulgy-headed tumble-weeds and sent them tumbling over and over, mile after mile, until they were caught at last in some draw, like helpless living things, to swell the heap for some prairie fire to feed upon. It lifted the sand from the river bed and swept it in a prairie simoon up the slope, wrapping the little cabin in a cloud of gritty dust. The cottonwoods along the waterway moaned as if in pain and flung up their white arms in feeble protest. The wild plum bushes in the draw were almost buried by the wind-borne drift smothering the narrow crevice, while out on the plains the long lashing waves of bended grass made the eyes burn with weariness. And the sun watched it all with unpitying stare, and the September heat was maddening. But it was cool inside the cabin. Sod houses shut out the summer warmth as they shed off the winter's cold.

Virginia Aydelot stood at the west window watching her husband trying to carry two full pails of water which the wind seemed bent on blowing broadcast along his path. He had been plowing a double fireguard around the premises that morning and his face and clothes were gray with dust. These days of unceasing winds seemed to Virginia to sap the last atom of her energy. But she was young and full of determination.

"Why did you put the well so far away, Asher?" she asked, as he came inside.

The open door gave the wind a new crevice to fill, and it slapped wrathfully at the buckets, splashing the contents on the floor.

"We have to put wells close to the water in this country. I put this one in before I built here. And if we have a well, we are so glad we don't try to move it. The wind might find it out and fill it up with sand while we were doing it. It's a jealous wind, this." Asher's smile lit up his dust-grimed face.

"I've tried all day to keep the dust off the table. I meant to do a washing this morning, but how could any garment stay on the line out there and not be whipped to shreds?"

"Virginia, did you ever do a washing before the war?" Asher asked through the towel. He was trying to scrub his face clean with the least possible amount of water.

"Oh, that's ancient history. No, nor did I do anything else. I was too young. Did you ever try to till a whole section of land back in Ohio before the war?" Virginia asked laughingly.

Asher took the towel from his head to look at her.

"You are older than when I first knew you — the little lady of the old Jerome Thaine mansion home. But you haven't lost any of that girl's charms and you have gained some new ones with the years."

"Stop staring at me and tell me why you didn't put the house down by the well, then," Virginia demanded.

"I did pitch my tent there at first, but it is too near the river, and several things happened, beside," he replied.

"Is that a river, really?" she inquired. "It looks like a weed trail."

"Yes, it is very real when it elects to be. They call it Grass River because there's no grass in it — only sand and weeds — and they call it a river because there is seldom any water in it. But I've seen such lazy sand-foundered streams a mile wide and swift as sin. So I take no risk with precious property, even if I have to tote barrels of water and slop the parlor rug on windy days."

"Then, why didn't you put another door in the kitchen end of the house?" Virginia questioned.

"Two reasons, dearie. First, can you keep one door shut on days like this, even when there is no draught straight through the house?" he inquired.

"Yes, when I put a chair against it, and the table against the chair, and the bed against the table, and the cookstove to back up the bed. I see. Shortage of furniture."

"No, the effect on this cabin if the wind had a sweep through two weak places in the wall. I built this thing to stay till I get ready to go away from it, not for it to go off and leave me sitting here under the sky some stormy day. Of course, the real home, the old Colonial style of house, will stand higher up after awhile, embowered in

trees, and the wind may play about its vine-covered verandas, and its stately front columns, but that comes later."

"All right, but what was the second reason for the one doorway? You said you had two?" Virginia broke in.

"Oh, did I? Well, the other reason is insignificant, but effective in its way. I had only one door and no lumber within three hundred miles to make another, and no money to buy lumber, anyhow."

"You should have married a fortune," his wife said demurely.

"I did." The smile on the lips did not match the look in the gray eyes. "My anxiety is that I shall not squander my possession, now I have it."

"You are squandering your dooryard by plowing out there in front of the house. Isn't there ground enough if the wind will be merciful, not to use up our lawn?" Virginia would not be serious.

"I have plowed a double fireguard, and I've burned off the grass between the two to put a wide band of protection about us. I take no chances. Everything is master in the wilderness except man. When he has tamed all these things —prairie fire, storm and drouth, winds and lonely distances, why, there isn't any more wilderness. But it's tough work getting acclimated to these September breezes, I know."

Virginia did not reply at once. All day the scream of the wind had whipped upon her nerves until she wanted to scream herself. But it was not in the blood of the breed to give up easily. Something of the stubborn determination that had made the oldtime Thaines drive the Quakers

from Virginia shone now in the dark eyes of this daughter of a well-bred house.

"It's all a matter of getting one's system and this September wind system to play the same tune," she said.

"Virginia, you look just as you did that day when you said you were going through the Rebel ranks in a man's dress to take a message for me to the Union officer of my command, although you ran the risk of being shot for a spy on either side of the lines. When I begged you not to do it, you only laughed at me. I thought then you were the bravest girl I ever saw. Now I know it."

"Well, I'll try not to get hysterical over the wind out here. It is a matter of time and adjustment. Let's adjust ourselves to dinner now."

Beyond her lightly spoken words Asher caught the undertone of courage, and he knew that a battle for supremacy was on, a struggle between physical outcry and mental poise.

After the meal, he said, "I must take my plow down to Shirley's this afternoon. His is broken and I can mend it while he puts in his fireguard with mine. I don't mind the wind, but I won't ask you to face it clear down to Shirley's claim. I don't like to leave you here, either."

"I think I would rather stay indoors. What is there to be afraid of, anyhow?" Virginia asked.

"Nothing in the world but loneliness," her husband replied.

"Well, I must get used to that, you know. I can begin now," Virginia said lightly.

But for all her courage, she watched him drive away with a sob in her throat. In all the universe there was nothing

save a glaring sunlight and an endless cringing of yellow, wind-threshed grass.

Asher Aydelot had come here with half a dozen other young fellows, all of whom took up claims along Grass River. Six months later Jim Shirley had come to the settlement with a like company who extended the free-holdings until it was seven miles by the winding of the river from Aydelot's claim on the northwest down the river to Shirley's claim on the southeast.

Eighteen months later only two men were left in the Grass River valley, Aydelot and Shirley. The shorter trail as the crow flies between their claims was marked by a golden thread of sunflowers. At the third bend of the winding stream a gentle ripple of ground rose high enough to hide the cabin lights from each other that otherwise might have given a neighborly comfort to the two lone settlers.

Shirley's cabin stood on a tiny swell of ground, mark of a one-time island, set in a wide bend in the river that was itself a natural fireguard for most of the circle of the premises.

The house was snug as a squirrel's nest. Before it was a strip of white clover, as green and fresh looking as if it were on the banks of Clover Creek in Ohio. Above the door a plain board bore the one word, "Cloverdale."

Jim Shirley stood watching Asher coming down the trail against the wind, followed by the big shepherd dog, Pilot, who had bounded off to meet him.

"Hello! How did you get away on a day like this?" he called, as the team drew near.

"Why, you old granny!" Asher stopped here.

Both men had been on the Kansas plains long enough

not to mind the wind. It flashed into Asher's mind that Jim was hoping to see his wife with him, and he measured anew the loneliness of the man's life.

"Most too rude for ladies just yet, although I didn't like to leave Virginia alone."

"What could possibly harm her? Your fireguard's done, double done; there's no water to drown in, no Indian to frighten, no wild beast to enter, no white man, in God knows how many hundred miles. Just nothing to be afraid of."

"Yes, that's it — just nothing. And it's enough to make even a braver woman afraid. It's the eternal vast nothingness, when the very silence cries out at you. It's the awful loneliness of the plains that makes the advance attack in this fight with the wilderness. Don't we both know that?"

"I reckon we do, but we got over it, and so will Mrs. Aydelot."

"How do you know that?" Asher inquired eagerly. "I believe she could hardly keep back the tears till I got away."

"Then why didn't you get away sooner? I know she will get over it, because she's as good a woman as we are men, and we stood for it."

"Well, here's your plow. Better get your guard thrown up. I can smell smoke now. There's a prairie fire sweeping in on this wind somewhere. There's a storm brewing, too. Remember what a fight we had with fire a year ago?"

Asher was helping to put Jim's team in the harness.

"Yes, you saved your well and a few other little things. But you've got your grit, you darned Buckeye, to hold on

and start again from the ashes. And now you have your wife here. You are lucky," Jim declared.

"Where's that broken plow of yours? Is it bolt or weld? Maybe I can mend it." Asher was casting about for tools.

"It's bolt. Everything is on the stable shelves," Jim called back against the wind, as he drove the plow deep in the black soil. "Be sure you put 'em back when you are through with 'em, too."

"Poor Jim!" Asher said to himself with a smile. "The artist in him makes him keep the place in order. He'd stop to hang up his coat and vest if he had to fight a mad bull. Poor judgment puts a good many tragedies into lives as well as stage villain types of crime."

And then Asher thought of Virginia, and wondered what she was doing through the long afternoon. He was whistling softly with a smile in his eyes as Jim Shirley made the tenth round of the premises and stopped opposite the stable door.

"Hey, Asher, come out and see the sky now," he called. "It's prairie fire and equinoctial storm combined."

Asher hurried out to see the dull southwest heavens shutting off the sunlight out of which raged a wind searing the sky to a dun gray.

"Don't stand there staring, you idiot. Why don't you get your plowing done?" he cried to Shirley.

Shirley began to loose the trace-chain from the plow.

"That strip is wide enough now," he declared. "I've got a clover guard, anyhow. I don't need to back-fire like my neighbors do."

As Asher untied his ponies and climbed into the wagon, Jim held their reins.

"Stop a minute. Let a single man offer you a word of advice, will you?" he asked.

"All right, I need advice," Asher smiled down on Jim's earnest face.

"Then heed it, too. No use to tell you to take care of your wife. You'll do that to a fault. But don't make any mistake about Mrs. Asher Aydelot. She went through Rebel and Union lines once to save your life. Don't doubt her strength to hold her own here as soon as the first fight is over. She is like that Kentucky thoroughbred of hers; she's got endurance as well as grace and beauty."

"Bless you, Jim," Asher said, as he clasped Shirley's hand. "I wish you had a wife."

"Well, they are something of an anxiety, too. Hustle home ahead of the storm. I've always wished that bluff at the deep bend didn't hide us from each other's sight. I'd like to blast it out."

Asher Aydelot hurried northward ahead of the hot winds and deepening shadows of the coming storm. And all the time, in spite of Jim's comforting words, an anxiety grew and grew. The miles seemed endless, the heavens darkened, and the wind suddenly gave a gasp and died away, leaving a hot, blank stillness everywhere.

Meanwhile, Virginia, alone in the cabin, had fallen asleep from sheer nerve weariness. When she awoke, it was late in the afternoon. The screaming outside had ceased, but the whir and whine were still going on, and the blaring light was toned by the dust-filled air.

"I was only tired," Virginia said to herself. "Now I am rested, I don't mind the wind."

She went out to watch the trail for Asher's coming. He was not in sight, so she came inside again, but nothing there could interest her.

"I'll go out and wait awhile," she thought.

Tying a veil over her head, she shut the cabin door and sat down outside. The wind died suddenly away, the trail was lifeless, and all the plain cut by the trail as well. Then the solitude of the thing took up the flight where the wind had left off.

"How can I ever stand this," Virginia cried, springing up. "But Asher stood it before I came, or even promised to come. No knight of the old chivalry days ever endured such hardships as the claimholders on these Kansas plains must endure. But it takes women to make homes. They can never, never win here without wives. I could go back to Virginia if I would." She shut her teeth tightly, and the small hands were clenched. "But I won't do it. I'll stay here with Asher Aydelot. Other men and women as eager as we are will come soon. We can wait, and some day, Oh, some day, we'll not miss what the Thaines lost by the war and the Aydelots lost by the Thaines, for we'll have a prince's holdings on these desolate plains!"

She stood with her hands clasped looking with far-seeing dark eyes down the long trail by the dry river bed, like a goddess of Conquest on a vast untamed prairie.

A sudden sweep of the wind aroused her, and the loneliness of the plains rose up again.

"I'll get Juno and follow the trail till I meet Asher. I can't get lost where there's nothing but space," she said aloud, as she hurried to the stable and led out the petted thoroughbred.

Horses are very human creatures, responding not only to the moods of their masters, but to the conditions that give these moods. The West was no kinder to the eastern-bred horse than to the eastern-bred man. All day Juno had plunged about the stable and pawed the hard earth floor in sheer nervousness. She leaped out of doors now at Virginia's call, as eager for comfort as a homesick child.

"We'll chase off and meet Asher, darling."

Even the soft voice the mare had heard all her days did not entirely soothe her. As Virginia mounted the wind flung shut the stable door with a bang. Juno leaped as from a gunshot, and dashed away up the river to the northwest. Her rider tried in vain to change her course and quiet her spirit. The mare only surged madly forward, as if bent on outrunning the tantalizing, grinding wind. With the sense of freedom, and with the boundlessness of the plains, some old instinct of the unbridled days of by-gone generations woke to life and power in her, and with the bit between her teeth, she swept away in unrestrained speed.

Virginia was a skilled horsewoman, and she had no fear for herself, so she held the reins and kept her place.

"I can go wherever you can, you foolish Juno," she cried, giving herself up to the exhilarating ride. "We'll stay together to the end of the race, and we will get it out of our systems once for all, and come back 'plains-broke.'"

Beyond a westward sweeping curve of the river's course the chase became a climb up a long slope that grew steeper and steeper, cutting off the view of the stream. Here Juno's speed slackened, then dropped into a steady canter, as she listened for a command to turn back.

"We'll go on to the edge of that bluff, lady, now we

are here, and see what is across the river," Virginia said. "Then we will hurry home to Asher and prairie hay."

When they came at last over a rough shale outcrop to the highest headland, the river bed lay between its base and a barren waste of sand dunes, with broad grassy regions beyond them spreading southward. The view from the bluff's top was magnificent. Virginia held Juno to the place and looked in wonder at the vast southwest on this strange September afternoon. Across a reach of level land, miles wide, a prairie fire was sweeping in the majesty of mastery. The lurid flames leaped skyward, while roll on surging roll of black smoke-waves, with folds of gray ashes smothering between, poured out along the horizon. Beyond the fire was the dark blue storm-cloud, banded across the front by the hail mark of coppery green.

Virginia sat enchanted by the grandeur of the scene. The veil had fallen from her head, and with white face and fascinated eyes, she watched the glowing fury, a graceful rider on a graceful black horse, on the crest of the lone headland outlined against the sky.

Suddenly the terror of it broke upon her. She was miles from the cabin with its double fireguard. Asher had said such fires could leap rivers. Between her and safety were many level banks where the sandy stream bed was narrow, and many grassy stretches where there was no water at all.

Distance, storm wind, fire and hail, all seemed ready to close down upon her, making her senses reel. One human being, alone before the wrath of Nature! In all the years that followed, she never forgot that scene. For in that moment a whisper came from somewhere out of the void, "The Eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the

everlasting arms," and she clasped her hands in a wordless prayer.

The wind that had been cruel all day grew suddenly kind. A dead calm held the air in a hot stillness. Then with a whip and a whirl, it swung its course about and began to pour cool and strong out of the northwest.

"The wind is changing," Virginia cried, as she felt its chill and saw the flame and smoke tower upward and bend back from the way. "It is blowing the fire to the east, to the southeast. But, will it catch Asher? Oh, you good Wind, blow south! blow south!" she pleaded, as she dashed down the long slope for the homeward race.

When Asher reached his claim, he looked in vain for Virginia's face as he passed the cabin window. He hurried the ponies into the corral, and the wagon under the lean-to beside the stable, half conscious that something was missing inside. Then he hastened to the cabin, but Virginia was not there.

"She may be in the stable." He half whispered the words in his anxiety.

The ponies in the corral were greedily eating their hay, but the black mare Juno was gone. As Asher turned toward the house, he caught the low roaring of the tempest and felt a rush of cool wind from somewhere. A huge storm-wave of yellow dust was rolling out of the southwest; beyond it the heavens were copper-green, and back of that, midnight darkness; while, borne onward by its force, low waves of prairie fire were swept along the ground.

Down at the third bend of the river where long growths overhung the stream, the flames crossed easily. Even as

Asher Aydelot watched the storm cloud, long tongues of fire came licking up the valley toward him, not a towering height, but a swift crawling destruction which he looked at with unseeing eyes, for his only thought was for Virginia.

"How could I have missed her if she started to meet me? Yet, where can she be now?" he groaned.

The hungry flames gnawed vainly about his broad fire-guard, then wavered back and forth along the south prairie, while he watched them under the fascination the mastery of the elements can exert. He turned at last from the fire and storm to see Juno and her rider swinging down the north-west prairie, keeping close to the river line before the chill north wind.

"Oh, Virgie, Virgie," he cried, as she slipped from the saddle and he caught her in his arms. "I've lived a hundred years since I left you this afternoon. What made you run away?"

In the joy of her safe return, he forgot the fire.

"Why, don't you see the wind is from the north? And it is blowing everything south now? I saw it begin away up the river. Did that guard really keep off that thing I saw from the high bluff up yonder?"

"I put it there to do it, and I'd take the chances. Awful as it is, it can't do anything but burn, and there's nothing here to burn. If it hadn't been there, everything would have been gone and you would have come back to a pile of ashes if the wind had left a pile."

"And you put your puny hands to the plow handles and say to that awful fury, 'So far, and no farther. This is my home.' You, one little human being!" Virginia's eyes were glowing with wonder at the miracle.

"Yes, with my puny hands. Me — a little man," Asher smiled quizzically, as he spread his broad brown hands before his face and drew himself up to his full six feet of height. "Only I say, 'our home.' But I was so scared about you, I forgot to notice the change in the wind. The fire is chasing to the south, and the hailstorm has veered off down that stream this side of those three headlands over there. The wind gives and the wind takes away. You can't plow a guard around it."

They sat down by the cabin door to watch the storm and flame blown far away in whirls of glaring light and surging cloud, until the rain at last drowned all the fury and washed it over the edge of the south horizon out of the world.

"Sometime we'll plant hedges and forest trees and checker the country with windbreaks until days like this will belong only to an old pioneer's memory," Asher said, as the storm swept wide away.

"Then, I'm glad I came early enough to see this. I'm getting 'plains-broke' along with Juno. Isn't it wonderful to be a real pioneer? Back in Virginia we were two centuries of generations away from the first settlers," Virginia exclaimed.

But Asher did not answer. He was thinking of Jim Shirley's declaration: "She's got endurance as well as grace and beauty."

CHAPTER IV

Distress Signals

Also, we will make promise. So long as the Blood endures,
I shall know that your will is mine; ye shall feel that my strength is yours.

—*A Song of the English.*

VIRGINIA AYDELOT soon grew brown as a berry in the tanning prairie winds, and it seemed impossible that this strong young woman of the sod cabin, with her simple dress and her cheeks abloom, could have been the dainty child of the old Southern mansion house.

No other autumn had ever seemed quite so beautiful to the Aydelots as this, their first autumn together. Life was before them with its call to victory. Youth and health, exuberant spirits and love were theirs. Theirs, too, was the great boundless world of mists and mirages, of rainbow tinted grasses and opal heavens, where no two sunsets were ever the same. They could laugh at their poverty, believing in a time when Ease and Plenty would rule the land where now they must fight for the bare necessities of existence, picturing life not as it was then with its many hardships, but as it would be in a future day when the real world whose last outpost they had left almost fifty miles to the eastward, should move toward them and help to people the prairies.

All the week days were full of duties, but every Sabbath morning found the three settlers of the valley making a prairie sanctuary of the Aydelot cabin. The elder Aydelots had not united with any church, but Asher and Jim, when

they were only boys, had been converted at a Methodist revival in Cloverdale. It was an old-fashioned kind of religious leading, but it was strong enough to hold the two for all the years that followed. Virginia had been reared an Episcopalian, but the men out-voted her and declared that the Aydelot home was the Sunflower Inn for six days in the week, but on the seventh it was the "First Methodist Church of the Conference of the Prairies."

There was no levity in its service, however, and He who dwelleth not in temples made with men's hands blessed with his own benediction of peace and trust and courage the three who set up their altar to Him in this far-away place.

On Sabbath afternoons they explored the sand dunes and grassy levels up and down the river. Sometimes they rode northward to the main trail in hope of sighting some prairie schooner coming hitherward, but not once that season did the trail hold a human being for them.

October slipped into November with a gradual sharpening of the frosty air. Everything had been made as snug as possible for the winter. The corrals were enlarged for the stock. The houses and stables were thatched against the cold and storms; and fuel and food were carefully stored. But November was almost passed before the end of the bright and sometimes even balmy days.

"We must have Jim up to the Sunflower Inn for Thanksgiving dinner. Might as well invite the whole neighborhood," Asher said one evening, as he helped Virginia with the supper dishes.

"I'm planning a real dinner, too," his wife declared, "just like old Mammy Diane used to cook. You couldn't tell it from hers if you'd ever eaten one of her spreads."

"I suppose it will taste about as near like one of Diane's meals as you will look like the cook that made her meals," Asher answered.

"Well, I'm getting along that way. Look at my tanned arms now. There's a regular dead line, a perfect fireguard at the elbow. And my muscles, Mammy Diane would say, 'is jus' monst'ous.'"

Virginia pushed back her sleeve to show the well-marked line where white above met tan below.

"Jim will think anything is better than eating alone out of his own grub box, and your dinner will be a feast," Asher said, opening the door to carry out the dish water. "What do you think of this?"

A gust of cold rain swished in as the door fell open.

"Our rain is here, at last. Maybe it will bring snow for Thanksgiving, and we could have a touch of New England here," Virginia said.

The pelting rain and deepening chill made the little home a very snug nest that night. There was only one stove to warm the house, but they kept up a fiction of parlor and dining room, kitchen and bed chamber. Even the library was there, although it encroached dreadfully on the parlor, bedroom and kitchen, all three, for it consisted of space enough for two chairs, one footstool, and a tiny lamp-stand, beside which they spent their evenings.

"Who's likely to drop in tonight, and what's the program for the evening: charades, music, readings, dancing, cribbage, or political speeches?" Asher inquired.

They had invented all sorts of pastimes, with make-believe audiences, such as little children create for their plays. For these two were children in a big child world.

The wilderness is never grown up. It is Nature's little one waiting to be led on and disciplined to mature uses. Asher and Virginia had already peopled the valley with imaginary settlers, each one of a certain type, and they adapted their pastime to the particular neighbors whom they chose to invite for the evening. How little the helpless folk in the city, bored with their own dullness, and dependent on others for amusement — how little could such as these cope with the loneliness of the home on the plains, or comprehend the resourcefulness of the home-makers there!

"Oh, let's just spend the evening alone. It's too stormy for the Arnolds and Archibalds beyond the Deep Bend, and the Spoopendykes have relatives from the East and the Gilliwigs are all down with colds."

Virginia had tucked herself down in the one rocking chair, with her feet on the footstool.

"It's such a nice night to be to ourselves. Watch the rain washing that west window. It's getting worse. I always think of Jim on nights like this."

"So do I," Asher said, as he sat down in the armed chair he had made for himself of cottonwood limbs with a gunny sack seat. "He's all alone with his dog these dark nights, and loneliness cuts to the heart of a man like Jim. I'm glad I have you, Virginia. I couldn't do without you now. The rain is getting heavier every minute. Sounds like it was thumping on the door. Listen to that wind!"

"Tell me about Jim, Asher. What made him come out here anyhow?" Virginia asked.

"I don't know all the story. Jim has never seemed to want to tell me, and I've never cared to ask him," Asher replied. "When we were away together at school, he was

in love with one of the prettiest girls that Ohio ever grew. She lived in the country up the valley from Cloverdale. Her name was Alice Leigh, and she was a whole cut above the neighborhood. Jim said she was an artist, could do wonderful things with a brush and she was just wild to go somewhere and take lessons.

"Jim was planning always how to give her the opportunity to do it, but her mother, who owned a lot of land for that country and could afford to send Alice away to study, couldn't see any dollar sign in it, so she kept her daughter on the farm."

Asher paused and looked at Virginia. His own happiness made his voice tremble as he went on.

"He has a brother Tank. I suppose his real name is Thaddeus, or Tantalus, or something like it; I never knew, and I never liked him well enough to ask. Tank was a black-eyed little runt whom none of the boys liked, a grasping cuss, younger than Jim, and as selfish as Jim is kind.

Just before I came West to scout the Indians off the map, Jim came back to school one time so unlike himself that I made him tell me what was the matter. It was Tank, he said, who was making trouble for him up in the Leigh neighborhood, and he was so grieved and unhappy, I wouldn't ask any more about it. I left for the West soon after that. When I went back to Cloverdale, Tank Shirley had married Alice Leigh and her mother's farm, and Jim had left the country. I ran on to him by accident up at Carey's Crossing when I came West again, but I've never heard him say a word about the matter, and, of course, I don't mention it, although I believe it would do Jim good

if he could bring himself to tell me about it. He's never been quite the same since. He has a little tendency to lung trouble, which the plains air is taking out of him, but he's had a bad attack of pneumonia, and it's an old enemy of his, as it always is to a man of his physique. He's a good worker, but lacks judgment to make his work count. Doesn't really seem to have much to work for. But he's a friend to the last ditch. Just hear the rain!"

"It seems to be knocking against the door again," Virginia said, "and how the wind does howl! Poor Jim!"

"Listen to that! Sounds like something loose against the window. There's something out there." Asher started up with the words.

Something white had seemed to splash up against the window and drop back again. It splashed up a second time, and fell again. Asher hurried to the door, and as he opened it, Pilot, the big white-throated dog from the Shirley claim, came bounding in, so wet and shaggy he seemed to bring all the storm in with him.

"Why, Pilot, what's the news?" Asher asked. "Jim's sent him, Virgie. He's done this trick often."

Pilot slipped to the warm stove and shook a whole shower out of his long, wet hair, while Asher carefully untied a little leather bag fastened to the collar under the dog's throat.

"You brave fellow. You've come all the way in the rain to bring me this."

He held up a little metal box from which he took a bit of paper. Bending close to the lamp, he read the message it contained.

"Something is wrong, Virginia. He says, 'I need you.'

What's the matter with Jim, Pilot? Come here and get up in the chair!"

The dog whimpered and sat still.

"Come out here, then! Come on, I tell you!" Asher started as if to open the door, but the dog did not move.

"He's not out of doors, and he isn't sitting up in a chair. Tell me, now, Pilot, exactly where Jim is! Jim, mind you!"

The dog looked at him with watchful eyes.

"Where's Jim? Poor Jim!" Asher repeated, and Pilot, with a sorrowful yelp, stretched himself at full length beside the stove.

"Jim's sick, then?"

Pilot wagged his tail understandingly.

"Virgie, Jim needs me. I must go to him." Asher looked at his wife.

"If Jim needs you, you'll need me," she replied.

"And we'll both need Pilot. So we'll keep all the human beings together," Asher said, as he helped his wife to fasten her heavy cloak and tie a long old-fashioned nubia about her head.

Then they went out into the darkness and the chilling rain, as neighbor to neighbor, answering this cry for help.

Pilot ran far ahead of them and was waiting with a dog's welcome when they reached Shirley's cabin. But the master, lying where he caught the chill draught from the open door, was rigid with cold. A sudden attack of pneumonia had left him helpless. And tonight, Pilot, doing a dog's best, did not understand the danger of leaving doors open, and of joyously shaking his wet fur down on the sick man to whom help was coming none too soon.

"Hello, Jim!" We're all here, doctor, nurse, cook, and hired man, and the little dog under the wagon," Asher said cheerily, bending over Jim's bunk. "That pup pretty nearly killed you with kindness, didn't he?"

Jim smiled wanly, then looked blankly away and lay very still.

The plains frontier had no use for the one talent folk. People must know how to take care of life there. Asher's first memory of Virginia was when she bent over him, fighting the fever in a prison hospital. He knew her talent for helping, and he had fairly estimated her quick ingenuity for this sod house emergency. But a new vision of the plains life came to her as she watched him, gentle-handed, swift, but unhurried, never giving an inch to the enemy in fighting with death for the life of Jim Shirley.

"He's safe from that congestion," Asher said when the morning broke. "But his fever will come on now."

"Where did you learn to do all these things for sick people?" Virginia asked.

"Partly from a hospital nurse I had in the war. Also, it's a part of the game here. I learned a few things fighting the cholera in sixty-seven. We must look everything on the frontier squarely in the face, danger and death along with the rest, just as we have to do everywhere else, only we have to depend on each other more here. Hold on there, Jim!"

Asher sprang toward Shirley, who was sitting upright, staring wildly at the two. Then a struggle began, for the sick man, crazed with delirium, was bent on driving his helpers from the cabin. When he lay back exhausted at length, Asher turned to his wife.

"One of us must go to Carey's Crossing for a doctor.

You can't hold Jim. It's all I can do to hold him. But it's a long way to Carey's. Can you go?"

"I'll try," Virginia replied. And Asher remembered what Jim had said on the windy September day: "She's as good a woman as we are men."

"You must take Pilot with you and leave him at home. You can't get lost, for you know the way up to the main trail, and that runs straight to the Crossing. Dr. Carey knows Jim, and he will come if he can, I am sure. He pulled Jim back once a year or two ago when the pneumonia had him. Heaven keep you safe, you brave little soul. Jim may turn the trick for us some day."

He kissed her good-by and watched her gallop away on her errand of mercy.

"The men will have all the credit by and by for settling this country. Little glory will come to their wives," he thought. "And yet, the women make anchor for every hearthstone, and share in every deed of daring and every test of endurance. God make me worthy of such a wife!"

Virginia Aydelot had spoken truly when she declared that the war had left the Thaines little except inherited pride and the will to do as they pleased. Inherited tendencies take varying turns. What had made a reformer of old Jean Aydelot made a narrow bigot of his descendant, Francis. What had made a proud, exclusive autocrat of Jerome Thaine, in Virginia Thaine developed into a pride of conquest for the good of others. It was this pride and the Thaine will to do as she pleased in defiance of the prairie perils that sent her now on this errand of mercy for a neighbor in need. And she took little measure of the reality of the journey. But she was prudent enough to

stop at the Sunflower Inn and make ready for it. She slipped on a warm jacket under her heavy cloak, and put on her thickest gloves and overshoes. She wound a long red scarf about her neck and swathed her head in the gray nubia. Then she mounted her horse for her long, hard ride.

The little sod house with all its plainness seemed very cosy as she took leave of it, and the woman instinct for home made its outcry in her when she turned her face resolutely from its sheltering warmth and felt the force of the north wind whipping mercilessly upon her. But she steeled herself to meet the cold, and her spirits rose with the effort.

"You are a mean little wind. Not half as big as the September zephyrs. Do your worst, you can't scare me," she cried, tucking her head down against its biting breath.

Upon the main trail the snow that had fallen after midnight deepened in the lower places as the wind whirled it from the prairie swells. It was not smooth traveling, although the direction of the trail was clear enough at first.

Virginia's heart bounded hopefully as Juno covered mile after mile with that persistent, steady canter that means everything good for a long ride. But the open plains were bitterly cold and the wind grew fiercer as the hours passed. High spirits and hope began to give place to determination and endurance. Virginia shut her teeth in a dogged resolve not to give up. Indeed, she dared not give up. She must go on. A life depended on her now, and two lives might be forfeited if she let this unending wind chill her to forgetfulness.

And so, alone in a white cruelty of solitary land, bounded only by the gray cruelty of the sky, with a dim-

ming trail before her under a deeper snowfall, and with long miles behind her, she struggled on.

She tried to think of everything cheerful and good. She tried to find comfort in the help she would take to Jim. Truly, she was not nearly so cold now and she was very weary and a wee bit sleepy. A tendency to droop in the saddle was overcoming her. She roused herself quickly, and with a jerk at the reins plunged forward at a gallop.

"It will take the stupor out of me," she cried.

Then the reins drooped and the fight with the numbing cold began again.

"I wonder how far along I am. I must be nearly there. I remember we lost sight of Carey's Crossing soon after we left last September. Some swell of ground cut us off quickly — and I've never seen a human being since then, except Asher and Jim Shirley and Pilot," she added.

"The snow is so much heavier right here. It varies so. I've passed half a dozen changes, but this is the deepest yet. I'm sure I can see the town beyond this slope ahead. Why! where's the trail, anyhow?"

It was nearing mid-afternoon. Neither horse nor rider had had food nor water, save once when Juno drank at a crossing. Virginia sat still, conscious suddenly that she has missed the trail somewhere.

"It isn't far, I know. Could I have left it when I took that gallop?" she asked herself.

She was wide awake now, for the reality of the situation was upon her, and she searched madly for some sign of the trail. In that level prairie sea there was no sign to show where the trail might lie. The gray sky was pitiless still, and with no guiding ray of sunshine the points of the

compass failed, and the brave woman lost all sense of direction.

"I won't give up," she said at last, despairingly, "but we may as well rest a little before we try again."

She had dropped down a decided slope and hurried to a group of low bushes in a narrow draw. While the wind was sliding the snow endlessly back and forth on the higher ground, the bushes were moveless. Slipping to the ground beside them, she stamped her feet and swung her arms until the blood began to warm her chilled body.

"It is so much warmer here. But what next? Oh, dear Father, help me, help me!" she cried in the depth of her need.

And again the same clear whisper that had spoken to her on the headland when she watched the September prairie fire, a voice from out of the vast immensity of the Universe, came to her soul with its calm strength.

"The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

How many a time in the days of winning the wilderness did the blessed promise come to the pioneer women who braved the frontier to build the homes of a conquering nation.

"I can't try that blind game again for awhile," Virginia said to herself. "I'll run up a distress signal; maybe somewhere help is coming to me. I know now how Jim felt all alone with only a dog's instinct to depend on. I'm glad I've tried to help him, even if I have failed."

She unwound the long red scarf from her neck and bound her nubia closer about her throat. Then bending the tallest bush that she could reach she fastened the bright

fabric to its upper limbs and let it swing to its place again. The scarf spread a little in the breeze and hung above her, a dumb signal of distress where help was not.

The minutes dragged by like hours to Virginia, trying vainly to decide on what to do next. The fury of a Plains blizzard would have quickly overcome her, but this was a lingering fight against cold and a pathless solitude. Suddenly the memory of one lonely Sabbath day came to her, and how Asher, always resourceful, had said:

"When you are afraid, pray; but when you are lonely, sing."

She had prayed, and comfort had come with the prayer. She could sing for comfort, if for nothing else. Somebody might hear. And so she sang. The song heard sometimes in the little prayer meeting in some country church; sometimes by sick beds when the end of days is drawing near; sometimes in hours of shipwreck, above the roar of billows on wide, stormy seas; and sometimes on battlefields when mangled forms lie waiting the burial trench and the mournful drumbeat of the last Dead March — the same song rose now on the lonely prairie winds sweeping out across the hidden trails and bleak open plains.

Nearer, my God, to thee,
  Nearer to thee,
E'en though it be a cross
  That raiseth me.
Still all my song shall be
Nearer, my God, to thee,
  Nearer to thee.

CHAPTER V

A Plainsman of the Old School

I have eaten your bread and salt,
I have drunk your water and wine;
The deaths ye died I have watched beside,
And the lives ye led were mine.

—Kipling.

THE little postoffice at Carey's Crossing in Wolf County was full of men waiting for the mail due at noon. Mail came thrice a week now, and business on the frontier was looking brighter. The postoffice was only one feature of the room it occupied. Drugs, hardware, horse-feed, groceries, and notions each had claims of their own, while beside the United States Mail Department was an ink-splashed desk holding a hotel register, likewise inksplashed. Beyond the storeroom was a long, narrow dining room on one side and a few little cell-like rooms on the other with a crack of a hall between them leading back to the kitchen, the whole structure, only one story high, having more vertical boards than horizontal in its making. But the lettering over the front door bore the brave information that this was the Post Office, the General Merchandise Store, and the Jacobs House, all in one.

The rain of the night had shifted to a light snow that whiffed about in little white pellets, adding nothing to the land in the way of moisture, or beauty, or protection from cold. Just a chill fraying out of the rain's end that matched the bitterness of the wind's long sweep from out

of the vast northwest. A gray sky was clamped down over all, so dull and monotonous, it seemed that no rainbow tint could ever again brighten the world.

"The stage is late again," observed one of the men.

"Always is when you want her particular." This from a large man who held the door open long enough to stare up the open street for the sign of the coming stage and to let in a surge of cold air at the same time.

"Well, shut the door, Champers. The stage doesn't come inside. It stops at Hans Wyker's saloon first, anyhow," one of the men behind a counter declared.

"If you'd open a bar here you'd do some business and run that Wyker fellow out. Steward, you and Jacobs are too danged satisfied with yourselves. We need some business spirit in this town if we want to get the county seat here," Champers declared.

"That may help your real estate, but it's not my kind of business, and no bar is going into this tavern," Jacobs replied, leaning his elbow against the back of Stewart, who was bending over the desk.

Stewart and Jacobs were young men, the former a finely built, fair-haired Scotchman from whom good nature, good health, and good morals fairly radiated; not the kind of man to become a leader, but rather to belong to the substantial following of a leader.

Jacobs was short, and slender, and dark — unmistakably of Jewish blood — with a keen black eye, quick motions, and the general air of a shrewd business man, letting no dollar escape him. He had also the air of a gentleman. Nobody in Carey's Crossing had ever heard him swear — the language of the frontier always — nor seen him drink,

nor had taken a parcel from his store that had been tied up with soiled fingers.

The Jacobs House register might be splashed with ink, but the ledger records of the business concern were a joy to the eye.

At Stewart's words Champers shut the door with a slam and blustered toward the stove, crowding smaller men out of their places before it.

"I am glad I don't have to run other men's affairs—" he began, when the rear door flew open and a slender young Negro hurried in with the announcement:

"De stage done sighted approachin' from de east, gen'lemen. Hit's done comin' into town right now."

"All right, Bo Peep; take care of the team," Stewart responded, and a general re-swarming of the crowd followed.

Just before the stage—a covered wagon drawn by two Indian ponies—reached the Jacobs House a young man crossed the street and entered the door. Some men are born with a presence that other men must recognize everywhere. To this man's quiet, "Hello, gentlemen," the crowd responded, almost to a man:

"Good morning, Doctor."

"Hello, Carey."

"Hello, Doc."

Each man felt the wish to be recognized by such greeting, and a place was given him at once. Only Champers, the big man, turned away with a scowl.

"Always gets the best of everything, even to the first chance to get his mail," he muttered under his breath.

But the mail was soon of secondary interest to the

dealer in real estate. Letters were of less importance to him than strangers, and a stranger had registered at the desk and was waiting while Stewart called out the mail in the postoffice department. Champers leaned over the shoulders of shorter men to read the entry in a cramped little hand, the plain name, "Thomas Smith, Wilmington, Delaware." Then he looked at the man and drew his own conclusions.

Dr. Carey was standing beside the letter counter when Todd Stewart read out, "'Mr. James Shirley,'" and, with a little scrutiny—"'Southwest of Carey's Crossing.' Anybody here know Mr. James Shirley?"

The stranger made a hasty step forward, but Dr. Carey had already taken the letter.

"I'll take care of that for you, Stewart," he said quietly. And turning, he looked into the eyes of the stranger.

It was but a glance, and the latter stepped aside.

Men formed quick judgments on the frontier. As Carey passed the register he read the latest entry there, and like Champers he too drew his own conclusions. At the door he turned and said to Jacobs.

"Tell Bo Peep to have your best horse ready by one o'clock for a long ride."

"All right, Doctor," Jacobs responded.

Half an hour later the Jacobs House dining room was crowded for the midday meal. By natural selection men fell into their places. Stewart and Jacobs, with Dr. Carey and Pryor Gaines, the young minister school teacher, had a table to themselves. The other patrons sat at the long board, while the little side table for two was filled today

with Champers, the real estate man, and the latest arrival, Mr. Thomas Smith, of Wilmington, Delaware.

"Who's the man with the dark mustache up there?" Thomas Smith asked.

"Doc Carey," Champers replied with a scowl.

"You don't seem to need him?" There was a double meaning in the query, and Champers caught both.

"No ways," he responded.

"Has some influence here?" the stranger asserted rather than questioned.

"A lot. Has the whole town under hoodoo. It's named for him. He has all the doctoring he can do and won't half charge, so's no other doctor'll come here. That's no way to build up a town. He'd get up at one o'clock in the morning to doctor a widder's cow. Now, sure he would, when he knows even a dead cow'd make business for the butcher to render up into grease and the cattle dealer to sell another cow."

"Not your style of a man then?" the stranger observed.

"Oh, pshaw, no, but, as I say, he's got the whole country hoodoo'd. Notice how everybody give him right of way to get his mail first? Why him? And hear him order the best horse? I'll bet a tree claim in hades right now that he's off somewhere to doctor some son of a gun out of cussed good will."

"Who is this James Shirley whose mail he seems to look after?"

There was a half-tone lowering of the voice as Smith pronounced the name, which was not lost on Champers, whose business was to catch men at all corners.

"Jim Shirley lives out in one of the rich valleys west.

Him and a fellow named Aydelot have some big notions of things out there. I don't know the doc's claim to control his mail, but nobody here would deny Carey any danged thing he wanted." Champers twisted his face in disgust.

"You are in the real estate business here?" Thomas Smith asked after a pause, as if the subject fell into entirely new lines.

"Yes," Champers answered absently with eyes alert on the opposite wall.

"I'd like to see you later, Mr.—"

"Champers—Darley Champers," and the dealer in land shoved a soiled card across the table. "Come in any time. This cold snap will soon be over and I can show you no end of land worth a gold mine any time you are ready. But make it soon. Land's goin' faster here'n you Delaware fellers think, and"—in a lower voice—"Doc Carey's drivin' over it all the time, and that Jew of a Jacobs ain't in business here on account of no lung trouble, and his hatred of saloons is somethin' pisen."

They finished their meal in silence, for they had come to an understanding. The afternoon was too short and cold for real estate business to be brisk, and nobody in Carey's Crossing noted that the front window of Darley Champer's little office was covered with a newspaper blind all the rest of that day, nor did anybody pay attention to the whereabouts of the stranger—Mr. Thomas Smith, of Wilmington, Delaware—during this same time. Nobody, except John Jacobs, of the Jacobs House, who gained his knowledge mostly by instinct; never, at least, by rude inquiry. He had been up on the roof helping Bo Peep to fasten the sign over the door which the wind had torn

loose. From this place he could see above the newspaper screen of the window across the street that Champers and Smith were in a tremendously earnest consultation. He would have thought nothing of it had not Champers chanced to sight him on the roof and immediately readjusted the newspaper blind to prevent observation.

"I'll offer to sell Darley a window shade cheap tomorrow and see how he bites," and the little Jewish merchant smiled shrewdly at the thought.

Out on the trail that day the snow lay deeper to the westward, hiding the wagon ruts. The dead sunflower stalks made only a faint black edging along the white monotony of the way and sometimes on bleak swells there were no markings at all. Some distance from Carey's Crossing a much heavier snowfall, covering a wide swath, under which the trails were entirely lost, had wandered in zigzag lines down from the northwest.

In the early afternoon Dr. Horace Carey had started west on the surest horse in the Stewart-Jacobs livery stable, taking his old-fashioned saddle-bags with him through force of habit, and by mid-afternoon was floundering in the edge of this deeper snowfall.

Nature must have meant Horace Carey for the plains. He was of medium height, compactly built, without an ounce of unnecessary weight. The well-rounded form took away all hint of spareness, while it did not destroy the promise of endurance. His heavy, dark hair and dark gray eyes, his straight nose and firm mouth under a dark mustache, and his well-set chin made up an attractive but not handsome face. The magnetism of his personality was not

in manly beauty. It was an inborn gift and would have characterized him in any condition in life. There was about him a genial dignity that made men look up to him and a willingness to serve that made selfishness seem mean. He could not have been thirty, although he had been on the plains for five years. The West was people by young men. It's need for daring spirits found less response in men of maturer life. But the West had most need for humane men. The bully, the dare-devil, the brutal, and the selfish were refuse before the force that swept the frontier onward; but they were never elements in real state building. Before such men as Carey they lost power.

The doctor rode away toward the west, bowing his head before the strong wind that he knew too well to fear, yet wondering as he rode if he had done wisely to dare the deepening snow of the buried trail.

"I might have waited a day, anyhow," he thought. "It's a devil of a ride over to Jim Shirley's, and we got only the tag ends of that storm down at the Crossing from the looks of this. However, I may as well keep at it now."

He surged on for a few miles without any signs of an open trail appearing. Then he dropped to a slow canter.

"I'd better get this worry straightened and my mind untangled if I am to have any comfort on this ride," he said aloud, as was his wont to do when out in the open alone. "Everything happens to a man who gives too much leeway to that indefinite inside guide saying, 'Do this! Let that alone!' And yet that guide hasn't failed me when I've listened to it."

He let the pony have the rein as he looked ahead with unseeing eyes.

"What made me take this day? First, everybody is well enough to be left for two or three days, good time for a vacation, and Stewart can take care of emergencies always. Second, I promised Jim I'd see that his letters got to him straightway. Third, yes, third, something said, 'Go now!' But here's the other side. Why go on the heels of a snowstorm? Why not keep Jim's letter a day or two? It's in my hands. And why mistrust a man who calls himself innocent 'Thomas Smith?' That's it. He's too innocent. There's no place on these wide Kansas prairies for that man Thomas Smith. He'd better get back to his home and his real name at once."

The doctor smiled at the thought, then he frowned at the cold wind and the shifting snows above the trail.

"You are a fool — a stack of fools, Dr. Horace Carey, to beat out of town miles on miles on a fool's errand over a lost trail, trusting your instinct that never lost you a direction yet, and all because of an inward call to an unrevealed duty. Some other day will do as well. And here's where I may as well cut off these notions of being led by inside signals. What should make me sight danger in a man I never saw before, and who will probably go out on the stage tomorrow morning? Oh, well, the Lord made us as we are. He knows why."

He wheeled the pony about and began to trot toward Carey's Crossing. Suddenly he halted.

"Let me see. I'm not twenty miles along, though I've come at a good rate. I believe I'll cut across northwest and hit some of the settlers up on Big Wolf Creek for the night. Lucky I've no wife to worry about me."

A wave of sadness swept over the man's face — just a

sweep of sorrow that left no mark. He turned abruptly from the trail and struck in a definite direction across the snow-covered prairie. Presently his path veered to the north, then to northwest.

"I know an ugly little creek running into Big Wolf that's the dickens to cross. I'll run clear round it, even if it takes longer. After all, I'm doing just what I said I wouldn't do. I don't know why I didn't go on, nor why I am tacking off up here. Something tells me to do it, and I'll do it."

But however changeable of mind he seemed to himself, Dr. Carey was a man who formed his judgments so quickly and acted upon them so promptly that he seemed most stable to other men. He rode forward now to a land wave that dropped on one side to a creek, a quarter of a mile away, where black shrubbery marked the water line. A long swell of wind swung down the valley, whirling the snow in eddies before it. As the doctor's eye followed them, he suddenly noted a red scarf lift above the tallest clumps of bushes and flutter out to its full length, then drop again as the wind swell passed.

"There's nobody in fifteen miles of here. I reckon that scarf blew there and caught some time this fall when somebody was going out on the trail. Mighty human looking thing, though. It seemed waving a signal to me. But I must hurry on."

He hastened at a gallop up the ridge away from the creek, his mind still on that red scarf flung about by the winter wind.

"It was a strange thing," he thought, "but every human token is startling out here. What's that now?"

The doctor had a plainsman's ear as well as a plainsman's eye. As he listened, through the wail of the wind borne along the distance, he caught the words of a song, low and pleading like a plaintive cry for help:

Though, like the wanderer,
The sun gone down,
Darkness be over me,
My rest a stone—
Yet in my dreams I'd be
Nearer, my God, to thee,
Nearer to thee.

It was a woman's voice and Carey faced about to listen. He knew it came from the bushes below the red scarf. So he changed his course and hurried around a bend in the stream to the other side of the brush where Virginia Aydelot stood beside Juno.

"I'm afraid there isn't even a stone to rest on here, Madam. Can I be of any service to you?" he said, lifting his hand toward his cap in semi-military salute.

Virginia stood looking at the stranger with a half-comprehending gaze. She had been less than an hour beside the bushes, but it had seemed to her like many hours. And the terrifying certainty of a night alone on the prairie made the sudden presence of a human being unreal to her.

"I beg your pardon; I am Dr. Carey, of Carey's Crossing, and I was striking across the prairie to the Big Wolf settlement when I saw your scarf and heard your singing. I took them both to be distress signals and came over to see if you needed me."

One had only to listen to Dr. Carey's voice to understand why Darley Champers should accuse him of laying a charm on the whole settlement.

Virginia recovered herself quickly, saying with a wan smile:

"You came just in time, Doctor. I am lost and need help. I was going to you, anyhow."

Each one's face was so muffled against the wind that the eyes and lips and a bit of the cheeks alone were visible.

"Not a bad-looking woman for all the Kansas tan," the doctor thought. "She has a voice like a true Virginian and fine eyes and teeth. But any woman who bundles up for a horseback ride across the plains on a day like this isn't out for a beauty show contest. I've seen eyes like that before, though, and as to her voice—"

"I am Mrs. Asher Aydelot from the Grass River Valley," Virginia went on. "There are only three settlers out there now, Mr. Shirley and my husband and myself. Mr. Shirley is very sick with pneumonia, and Mr. Aydelot could not leave him, so I started to Carey's Crossing to see if you could come to him. I missed the trail somewhere. I was trying to help, but I failed, you see."

The doctor was looking at her with a puzzled expression which she thought was born of his sympathy. To the mention of her failing he responded quickly:

"No, Mrs. Aydelot, you succeeded. I had started to Shirley's myself on personal business, and I was letting some whim turn me aside. If you had kept the trail we should have missed each other, for I was on my way to Big Wolf Creek, a good distance away, and your leaving the trail and wandering down here was providential for Shirley. Shall I show you on to the Crossing?"

"Oh, no, Doctor, if you will only come back with me. I don't want to go on," Virginia insisted.

"You are a regular westerner, Mrs. Aydelot," Carey declared. "But you haven't been out here long. I heard of your passing through our town late last summer. I was up on Big Wolf then and failed to see you. I know something of your husband, but I have never met him."

He helped her to mount her horse and together they sought the trail and followed it westward in the face of the wind.

Near midnight down in Jim Shirley's cabin Asher Aydelot turned from a lull in the sick man's ravings to see Dr. Horace Carey entering the door with a pair of saddle bags in his hand.

"Hello, sir! Aydelot? I'm Carey, the doctor."

Then as his quick eye took in the haggard face of the man before him, he said cheerily:

"Everything fit as a fiddle up your way. I left your cabin snug and warm as a prairie dog's hole, and your wife is sound asleep by this time, with a big dog on guard. Yes, I understand," he added, as Asher silently gripped his hand. 'You've died a thousand deaths today. Forget it, and give me a hand here. My own are too stiff, and I must get these wet boots off. I always go at my work dry shod."

He had pulled a pair of heavy shoes from the saddle bags, and was removing his outer coat and sundry scarfs, warming his hands between whiles and seemingly unconscious of the sick man's presence.

"You are wet to the knees. You dared the short trail and the strange fords of rivers on a night so dark as

this," Asher declared as he helped Carey to put off his wrappings.

"It's a doctor's business to forget himself when he sees a distress signal." Then Carey added quietly: "Tell me about Shirley. What have you been doing for him?"

He was beside Jim's bunk now and his presence seemed to fill the whole cabin with its subtle strength.

"You know your business, doctor; I'm a farmer," Asher said, as he watched this frontier physician moving deftly about his work.

"Well, if you mean to farm so far from pill bags you have done well to follow my trade a little, as you seem to have done with Shirley," Carey asserted, as he noted the evidences of careful nursing.

"Oh, Virginia — Mrs. Aydelot — helped me," Asher assured him. "She's a nurse by instinct.

"What did you call your wife?" the doctor inquired.

"Virginia — from her own state. Pretty sick man here." Asher said this as Dr. Carey suddenly bent over Shirley with stern eyes and tightening lips. But the eyes grew tender when Jim looked up into his face.

"You're all right, Shirley. You must go to sleep now."

And Shirley, who in his delirium had fought his neighbor all day, became as obedient as a child, as a very sick child, that night under Horace Carey's hand.

The next morning Virginia Aydelot was not able to rise from her bed, and for many days she could do nothing more than to sit in the rocking chair by the windows and absorb sunshine.

On the fourth day after Carey had reached Shirley's

Asher went down the river in the early afternoon to find how Jim's case was progressing, leaving his wife comfortably tucked up in the rocking chair by the west window. The snow was gone and the early December day was as crisp and beautiful as an Indian summer day in a colder climate. Virginia sat watching the shadows of the clouds flow along the ground and the prairie hues changing with the angle of the afternoon sunlight. Suddenly a sound of ponies' feet outside was followed by a loud rap on the door.

"Come in!" Virginia called. "Lie down, Pilot!"

Pilot did not obey, but sat up alert before his mistress as Darley Champers' bulk filled the doorway.

"Excuse me, Madam," the real estate dealer said, lifting his hat. "Me and my friend, Mr. Smith out there, are looking up a claim for a friend of ours somewhere out in the Grass River settlement. Can you tell me who owns the last claim taken up down the river, and how far it is from here?"

"Mr. Shirley's claim is a few miles down the river, if you go by the short trail and ford at the bends, but much longer if you go around by the long trail," Virginia explained.

"Is it occupied?" Champers put the question in a careless tone.

Pilot's bristles, that had fallen at the sound of Virginia's voice, rose again with the query. It is well to be wary of one whom a dog distrusts. But the woman's instinct in Virginia responded little to the dog's uneasiness, and she replied courteously:

"Yes, Mr. Shirley is there, very sick."

"Um, who have I the honor of addressing now?" Champers asked awkwardly, as if to change the subject.

"Mrs. Asher Aydelot."

"Well, now, I've heard of Aydelot. Where is your man today? I'd like to meet him, Mrs. A."

It was the man's way of being friendly, but even a duller-fibred man than Champers would have understood Mrs. Aydelot's tone as she said:

"You will find him at Shirley's, or on the way. Only the long trail winds around some bluffs, and you might pass each other without knowing it."

"How many men in this settlement now?" Champers asked.

"Only two," Virginia replied, patting Pilot's head involuntarily.

"Only two! That's sixteen more'n'll ever make it go here," Darley Champers declared. "Excuse me for saying it, Mrs. Aydelot, but I've been pretty much over Kansas, and this is the poorest show for settlement the Lord ever left out of doors. I've always heard this valley was full of claims you simply couldn't give away, but my friend, who has no end of money and influence fur developin' the country, wanted me to look over the ground along the Grass River. It's dead desolation, that's all; no show on earth in fifty year out here, and in fifty year we won't none of us care for more'n six feet of ground anywhere. I'm sorry for you, Madam. You must be awfully lonely here, but you'll be gettin' away soon, I hope. I must be off. Thank you, Madam, for the information. Good day," and he left the cabin abruptly.

The sunshine grew pallid and the prairies lay dull and

endless. The loneliness of solitude hung with a dead heaviness and hope beat at the lowest ebb for Virginia Aydelot, trying bravely to deny his charge against the future of the land she had struggled so to dream into fruitfulness. She was only a woman, strong to love and brave to endure, but neither by nature nor heritage shrewd to read the tricks of selfish trade. And she believed that while Asher and Jim Shirley were hopeful dreamers like herself, here was an ill-mannered but unprejudiced man who saw the situation as they could not see it.

"That woman and her fool dog were half afraid of me at first. They don't know that women aren't in my line. I'd never harm a one of 'em."

"They're in my line always. Was she good looking? I never pass a pretty woman," Thomas Smith said smoothly.

"Don't be a danged fool, Smith. I might cut a man's throat to some extent, if it would help my business any, but I'd cut it more'n some if he forgets his manners round a woman. We're a coarse, grasping lot out here fur as property goes, and we ain't got drawing-room manners, but it takes your smug little easterners to be the real dirty devils. Come on."

And Thomas Smith knew that the big, coarse-grained man was sincere.

"Yonder's Aydelot now. Want to see him?" Darley Champers declared, sighting Asher down the short trail beyond the deep bend.

"I've no business with him, and he's the man I don't want to see," Thomas Smith said hastily. "I'll ride on out of sight round this bend and wait for you. It's a good place when you don't want to be seen."

"Depends on how much of a plainsman Aydelot is. He ought to have sighted both of us half a mile back," Champers declared.

But Smith hurried away and was soon behind the low bluff at the deep bend. Asher Aydelot had seen the two before they saw him, and he saw them part company and only one come on to meet him.

"You're Aydelot from the claim up the river, I s'pose. I'm just out lookin' at the country. Not much to it but looks," Champers declared as the two met at the deep bend.

"Yes, sir; my name is Aydelot," Asher replied, deciding at once that this stranger was not to be accepted on sight, a judgment based not on a woman's instinct but on a man's experience.

"Any of these claims ever been entered?" Champers asked.

"Yes, sir; most of them," Asher responded.

"I see. Couldn't make it out here. I s'pose you'll get out next. Hard place to take root. Most too far away, and land's a little thin, I see," the real estate dealer remarked carelessly.

"Yes, it's pretty well out," Asher assented.

"The river ever get low here?" was the next query.

"Not often, in the winter," Asher replied.

"Most too uncertain for water power, though, and the railroad ain't comin' this way at all. I must be gettin' on. One man's too few to be travelin' so fur from civilization."

"Come up to the cabin for the night," Asher said, with a plainsman's courtesy.

"Thank you, no. Hope to see you again nearer to the Lord's ground; losin' game here. Goodby."

Asher did not look like a disappointed man when he reached the Sunflower Inn.

"Best news in the world," he declared when Virginia related what had happened in the cabin that afternoon. "A man who goes prospecting around the Kansas prairies doesn't discourage the poor cuss he pities; he tries to encourage the wretch to hold on to land he wouldn't have himself. Listen to me, Virgie. That man has his eye on Grass River right now. I know his breed."

Meanwhile the early dusk found Champers and Smith approaching Shirley's premises.

"I don't know about Aydelot," Champers declared as they lariated their ponies beyond the corral. "He's one of the clear-eyed fellows who sees a good thing about as soon as you sight it yourself, and then he turns clam and leach and you won't move him nor get nothin' out of him, and that's all there is to it."

"Yes, I know that. I mean, you say he does?" Smith seemed too preoccupied to follow his own words, but Champers followed Smith shrewdly enough.

They made a hasty but careful examination of the premises, keeping wide of the cabin where the sick man lay.

"He's got three horses in there. He's well fixed," Champers declared, peering into the stable, where it was too dark to discover that the third horse was Dr. Carey's. "Let's hike off for some deserted shack for the night and get an early start for the Crossing in the morning. Easy trick, this, gettin' in and out of here unseen. And it's one of the best claims on Grass River."

"Couldn't we slip into the cabin?" Smith asked in a half whisper. "If he's too sick"—Something in the

man's face made it look diabolical in the fading twilight, and he seemed about to start toward the house.

"Now, see here, Mr. Smith," Champers said with slow sternness. "What'd I say back there about women? Neither we ain't man-slaughterers out here, though your *Police Gazette* and your dime novels paint us that way. There's more murderers per capiter to a single street in New York than in the whole state of Kansas, right now. If it's land and money, we're after it, tooth an' toenail, but forget the thing in your mind this minute or you an' me parts company right here, an' you can hoof it back to Carey's Crossing or Wilmington, Delaware."

Smith made no reply and they mounted their ponies and galloped away.

And all the while Dr. Horace Carey, inside the unlighted cabin, had watched their movements with grim curiosity, even to the hesitating, half-expressed intention of entering the dwelling.

"Champers would pull up another man's stakes and drive them into his own ground if he wanted them, but that Thomas Smith would drive them through the other fellow's body if nobody else was around," was the doctor's mental comment as he went outside and watched the course of the two men till the twilight gathered them in.

When the turning point came to the sick man, the up-climb was marvelous, as his powers of recoil asserted themselves.

"It is just a matter of self-control and good spirits now, Shirley, and you have both," Dr. Carey said, as he sat by his patient on the ninth day.

"You staid the game out, Carey," Shirley said with an undertone of hopelessness behind his smile. "What possessed you to happen in, anyhow?"

"I was possessed not to come and turned back after I'd started. If I hadn't met Mrs. Aydelot coming after me I'd have rampsed off up on Big Wolf Creek for a week, maybe, and missed your case entirely."

"And likewise my big fee," Jim interrupted. "Some men are born lucky. And so Mrs. Aydelot went after you. Asher's a fortunate man to have a wife like Virginia, although he had to give up an inheritance for her."

"How was that?" Carey asked, glad to see the hopeless look leaving Jim's eyes.

"Oh, it's a pretty long story for a sick man. The mere facts are that Asher Aydelot was to have bank stock, a good paying hotel, and a splendid big farm if he'd promise never to marry any descendant of Jerome Thaine, of Virginia. Asher hiked out West and enlisted in the cavalry and did United States scout duty for two years, hoping to forget Virginia Thaine, who is a descendant of this Jerome Thaine. But it wasn't any use. Distance don't count, you know, in cases like that."

"Yes, I know."

Shirley was too sick to notice Dr. Carey's face, and he did not remember afterward how low and hard those three words sounded.

"It seems Virginia had pulled Asher through a fever in a Rebel hospital, and we all love our nurses." Jim patted the doctor's knee as he said this. "And when the father's will was read out against ever, ever, ever his son marrying a Thaine, Asher promptly said that the whole inheritance,

bank stock, hotel, and farm, might go where — the old man Aydelot had already gone — maybe. Anyhow, he married Virginia Thaine and she was game to come out here and pioneer on a Grass River claim. Strange what a woman will do for love, isn't it? And to go on a forty-mile ride to save a worthless pup's life! That's me. Think of the daughter of one of those old Virginia homes up to a trick like that?"

"You've talked enough now."

Shirley looked up in surprise at this stern command, but Dr. Carey had gone to the other side of the cabin and sat staring out at the river running bank-full at the base of the little slope.

When he turned to his patient again, the old tender look was in his eyes. Men loved Jim Shirley if they cared for him at all. And now the pathetic hopelessness of Jim's face cut deep as Carey studied it.

"I say, Shirley, did you ever know a man back East named Thomas Smith?" he asked.

"No. Strange name, that! Where'd you run onto it? Smith! Smith! How do you spell it?" Jim replied indifferently.

"With a spoonful of quinine in epsom salts, taken raw, if you don't pay attention. Now listen to me." The doctor's tone was as cheery as ever.

"Well, don't make it necessary for me to tell you when you've talked enough."

In spite of the joking words, there was a listless hopelessness in Shirley's voice, matching the dull, listless eyes. And Horace Carey rose to the situation at once.

"A stranger named Thomas Smith came to the Crossing

the day I came down here. Rather a small man, with close-set, dark eyes; signed his name in a cramped, left-handed writing. I noticed his right hand seemed a little stiff, sort of paralyzed at the wrist. But here's the funny thing. He made me uneasy, and he made me think of you. Could you identify him? He looked as much like you as I look like that young darkey, Bo Peep, up at the Jacobs House."

"None of my belongings. You are a delicate plant to be so sensitive to strangers." Jim sighed from mental weariness more than from physical weakness.

"I was sensitive, and when I heard Stewart call out your name in the mail and saw this man step up as if to take the letter, I took it. And if you'll take a brace and decide it's worth while you can have it. It's addressed in a woman's handwriting, not a Thomas Smith style of pinching letters out of a penholder and squeezing them off the pen point. Lie down there, man!"

For Jim was sitting up, listening intently. With trembling fingers he took the letter and read it eagerly. Then he looked at Carey with eyes in which listlessness had given place to determination.

"Doctor, I was ready to throw up the game five minutes ago. Now I'll do anything to get back to strength and work."

"You don't seem very joyous, however," the doctor responded.

"Joy don't belong to me. We parted company some years ago. But life is mine."

"And duty?"

"Yes, and duty. Say, Doctor, if you'd ever cared all there was in you to care for one woman, and then had to

give her up, you'd know how I feel. And if, then, a sort of service opened up before you, you'd know how I welcome this."

Jim's face, white from his illness, was wonderfully handsome now, and he looked at his friend with that eager longing for sympathy men of his mould need deeply. Horace Carey stood up beside the bed and, looking down with a face where intense feeling and self-control were manifest, said in a low voice:

"I have cared. I have had to give up, and I know what service means."

CHAPTER VI

When the Grasshopper Was a Burden

Although the figtree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

—Habakkuk.

WHILE Jim Shirley was getting back to health, he and his physician had many long talks regarding the West and its future; its products and its people. There was only one topic in which Horace Carey was but intermittently interested, namely, Jim's neighbors—the Aydelots. At least, it seemed so to Jim, who had loved Asher from boyhood, and had taken Virginia on sight and paid homage to her for all the years that followed. Jim accepted the doctor's manner at first as a mere personal trait, but, having nothing to do except to lie and think, he grew curiously annoyed over it.

"I wish you'd tell me what ails you?" he blurted out one evening, as the two sat together in the twilight.

"About what?" the doctor inquired. "If I knew, I might even risk my own medicine to get over it."

"Don't joke, Horace Carey, not with a frail invalid. I've tried all day to talk to you about my neighbors and you turn the subject away as if it was of no consequence, and now, tonight, you settle down and say, 'Tell me about the Aydelots.' Why do you want to hear in the dark what you won't listen to in the daylight?"

"Oh, you are a sick man, Jim, or you wouldn't be so silly," the doctor replied, "but to please you, I'll tell you the truth. I'm homesick."

"Yes?"

"And this Mrs. Aydelot was a Virginia woman."

"Yes?"

"Well, I'm a true son of Virginia, and I thought it might make me happy to hear about somebody from—"

"You are a magnificent liar," Jim broke in.

"Evidently it's better to have you talk about your neighbors than your medical advisor tonight," Carey retorted.

"Oh, I won't say a word more," Jim declared.

"More Ananias magnificence! Do you suppose the Aydelots will be down before we go away?" the doctor asked.

"We?"

"Yes, I am going to take you with me, or give you a quieting powder when I leave here. On your own declaration you'd do anything to get back to strength and work. Now, the only way to get well, with or without a physician, is to get well. And you'll never do that by using up a little more strength every day than you store up the night before. Men haven't sense enough to be invalids. Nothing else is such a menace to human life as the will of the man who owns that life. You'll obey my will for a month or two."

"You are a—doctor, Carey. No, the Aydelots won't be down before we go away, because Virginia has been sick ever since that awful trip to Carey's Crossing," Jim said sadly.

"Why haven't you told me?" Carey's voice was hardly audible.

"Because Asher just told me today, and because you took no interest in them."

"Sickness is a doctor's interest, always," Carey replied in a stern voice. And then the two sat in silence while the night shadows darkened the little cabin.

As soon as Shirley was able to ride, he went up to Carey's Crossing for a two months' stay, and the Aydelots were left far away from the edge of civilization. A heavy snowfall buried all the trails and the world, the happy, busy world, forgot these two holding their claim on the grim wilderness frontier.

In after years they often talked of the old pioneer days, but of this one winter they spoke but rarely.

"We lived alone with each other and God," Virginia said once. "He walked beside us on the prairie and made our little sod house His sanctuary. Those were consecrated days to Asher and me, like the stormy days of our first love in the old war times, and the first hours of our baby's life. We were young and full of hope and belief in the future, and we loved each other. But we had need to have shoes of iron and brass, as Moses promised Asher of old. It was a hard, hard way, but it was His way. I am glad we walked through it all. It made the soil of Kansas sacred to us two forevermore."

One March day spring came up the Grass River Valley with a glory all its own, and sky and headland and low level prairie were baptized with a new life. A month later a half-dozen prairie schooners moved out on the old sun-

flower-bordered trail. Then following down the Grass River trail, the schooner folk saw that the land, which Darley Champers had denounced, was very good. And for Asher and Virginia Aydelot, the days of lonely solitude were ended.

But the prairie had no gifts to bestow. It yielded slowly to its possessors only after they had paid out time and energy and hope and undying faith in its possibilities. The little sum of money per acre turned over to the Government represented the very least of the cost. There were no forests to lay waste here, nor marshes to be drained. Instead, forests must be grown and waters conserved. What Francis Aydelot with the Clover Valley community had struggled to overcome on the Ohio frontier, his son, Asher, with other settlers now strove to develop in Kansas. But these were young men, many of them graduates, either in the North or the South, from a four years' course in the University of the Civil War. No hardship of the plains could be worse than the things they had already endured. These men who held the plow handles were State builders and they knew it. Into the State must be builded schools and churches, roads and bridges, growing timber and perpetual water reservoirs; while fields of grain and orchard fruitage, and the product of flock and herd must be multiplied as the sinews of life and larger opportunity. For all these things the Kansas plains offered to Asher Aydelot and his little company of neighbors only land below, crossed by a grass-choked river, and sky overhead, crossed but rarely by blessed rain-dropping clouds. And yet the less the wilderness voluntarily gave up, the more these farmer folk were determined to win from it.

Truly, they had need not only for large endurance in the present, but for large vision of a future victory, and they had both.

The weight of pioneer hardship, however, fell heaviest on the women of whom Virginia Aydelot was a type. Into the crucible out of which a state is moulded, she cast her youth and strength and beauty; her love of luxury, her need for common comforts, her joy in the cultured appointments of society. She had a genius for music, trained in the best schools of the East. And sometimes in the lonely days, she marked her only table with a bit of charcoal to the likeness of a keyboard. Then she set her music against her clean dishpan and dumbly fingered the melodies she had loved, hoping her hands might not lose all their cunning in these years of home-making on the plains.

The spring of the memorable year of 1874 opened auspiciously. The peach trees on the Aydelot and Shirley claims bloomed for the first time; more sod had been turned for wheat and corn; gardens and truck patches were planted; cattle were grazing beyond the sand dunes across the river, while the young cottonwood and catalpa groves, less than three feet high it is true, began to make great splotches of darker green on the prairie, promising cool forest shade in coming years. Mail went west on the main trail three times a week. The world was coming nearer to the Grass River settlement which, in spite of his doleful view once, Darley Champers was helping to fill up to the profit of the real estate business.

Carey's Crossing, having given up all hope of becoming a county seat, had faded from the face of the earth. The new county seat of Wolf County was confidently ex-

pected to be pitched at Wykerton, up in the Big Wolf Creek settlement, where one Hans Wyker, former saloon-keeper of Carey's Crossing, was building up a brewery for the downfall of the community. Dr. Carey was taking an extended medical course in the East, whither Bo Peep had followed him. Darley Champers was hovering like a hawk between Wykerton and the Grass River settlement. Todd Stewart had taken a claim, while John Jacobs, temporarily in the East, was busy planting the seeds for a new town which no Wyker brewery should despoil.

All lovely was this springtime of 1874. Midsummer had another story to tell. A story of a wrathful sun in a rainless sky above a parched land, swept for days together by the searing south winds. In all the prairie there was no spot of vivid green, no oasis in the desert of tawny grasses and stunted brown cornstalks, and bare, hot stubble wherefrom even the poor crop of straw had been chaffless and mean.

On a Sabbath morning in late July, the little Grass River schoolhouse was crowded, for Sabbath school was the event of the week. It did not take a multitude to crowd the sod-built temple of learning. Even with the infant class out of doors in the shade, the class inside filled the space. The minister school-teacher, Pryor Gaines, called it the "old folks' class," although there was not a person over thirty-five years of age in the whole settlement.

Asher Aydelot was the superintendent, and Virginia took care of the infant class. Jim Shirley led the singing, and Pryor Gaines taught the "old folks." He was the same minister school-teacher who had sat at the table with Dr. Carey and Todd Stewart and John Jacobs on the day that

Thomas Smith ate his first meal at the Jacobs House. With the passing of Carey's Crossing, he had taken a homestead claim on Grass River.

This morning the lesson was short, and the children, finding the heat of the shade outside unbearable, were sitting on the earth floor beside their parents. Nobody seemed ready to go home.

"Times are getting worse every day," one man observed. "No rain since the tenth of May, and the prettiest stand of wheat I ever saw, burned to a half-yield or less before cutting time. I'd counted on wheat for my living this year."

"It's the same if you'd had corn, Bennington," Jim Shirley observed. "I was polishing my crown for a Corn King Festival this fall. I don't believe I'll harvest fifteen bushels to the acre."

"Fifteen bushels!" another neighbor exclaimed. "Fifteen ears to the row a section long would encourage me. Darley Champers told me when I took up my claim, if I'd plant a grove or two, that in three years the trees would be so big that rainfall would be abundant. You all know my catalpa woods is a wonder," he added with a wink.

Darley Champers himself had just come down the trail and was entering the door.

"Well, come over our way if you are on the hunt for prosperity," Todd Stewart interposed. "Grass River isn't living up to its name any better than our creek; isn't any fuller of weeds than our brook is of — shale. I did lose the trail in your river this morning, though. The weeds are nearly up to the pony's flanks. Think of the fertility of a river bed that will grow weeds three feet

high and two shades more yellow green than the dead grass on the bank. If there's a drop of water in our creek for twenty miles, I'd go get it and have Brother Gaines analyze it to make sure it wasn't resin."

"You do well to see the humor of the situation, Stewart," Pryor Gaines began, with the cheery tone of a man who believes in hope.

"I don't see that that helps any," Bennington, the first speaker, broke in dolefully. "Joking isn't going to give us food and clothes and fuel till crop time comes again — if it ever does."

"I'm not suffering for extra clothes. What I wear now is a burden," Todd Stewart declared.

"Well, gentlemen." Darley Champers took the floor. "What are you going to do? That's what brought me here today. I knowed I'd find you all here. When I sent some of you fellows into this blasted Sahara, I was honest. I thought Grass River was a real stream, not a weed patch and a stone out-crop. I'd seen water in it, as I can prove by Aydelot. Remember, when we met down by the bend here, one winter day?"

"Yes, I remember," Asher replied.

"Well, I just come by there and there ain't a drop of water in that deep bend, no more'n in my hat." Champers plumped his hat down on the floor with the words. "And the creek, on Stewart's testimony, is a blasted fissure in the earth."

"I always said when that bend went dry, I'd leave the country, but I can't," Jim Shirley said doggedly.

"Why not?" Champers inquired.

"Because I can't throw away the only property I have in

the world, and I haven't the means to get away, let alone start up anywhere else."

"We're all in the same boat," Bennington declared.

"Same boat, every fellow rocking it, too, and no water to drown in if we fall out. We're in the queerest streak of luck yet developed," Todd Stewart observed.

"Let's take a vote, then, and see how many of us really have no visible means of support and couldn't walk out of here at all. Let's have a show of hands," Jim Shirley proposed.

"How did you decide?" Champers asked, as the hands dropped.

His eyes were on Asher Aydelot, who had not voted.

"Didn't you see? Everybody, except Asher there, is nailed fast to the gumbo," Stewart declared.

Darley Champers looked Asher Aydelot straight in the eyes, and nobody could have said that pity or dislike or surprise controlled the man's mind, for something of all three were in that look. Then he said:

"Gentlemen, I know your condition just as well as you do. You're in a losing game, and it's stay and starve, or—but they ain't no 'or.' Now, I'll advance money tomorrow on every claim held here and take it and assume the mortgage. Not that they are worth it. Oh, Lord, no. I'll be land-logged, and it's out of kindness to you that I'm willin' to stretch them fellers I represent in the East. But I'll take chances. I'll help each feller of you to get away for a reasonable price on your claim. It's a humanitarian move, but I may be able to lump it off for range land in a few years for about what it costs to pay taxes. But, gents, I got some of you in and I'm no scallawag when it

comes to helpin' you out. Think it over, and I'll be down this way in two weeks. I've got to go now. It's too infernal hot to keep alive here. I know where there's two sunflower stalks up on the trail that's fully two feet tall. I've got to have shade. Goodday." And Champers was gone.

"What do you say?" The question seemed to come from all at once.

"Let Pryor Gaines speak first. He's our preacher," Asher said with a smile.

Pryor Gaines was a small, fair-faced man, a scholar, a dreamer, too, maybe. By birth or accident, he had suffered from a deformity. He limped when he walked, and his left hand had less than normal efficiency. On his face the pathos of the large will and the limited power was written over by the ready smile, the mark of abundant good will toward men.

"I am out of the race," he said calmly. "I'm as poor as any of you, of course, and I must stay here anyhow, Dr. Carey tells me. I came West on account of heart action and some pulmonary necessities. I cannot choose where I shall go, even if I had the means to carry out my choice. But my necessities need not influence anyone," he added with a smile. "I can live without you, if I have to."

"How about you?" Stewart said, turning to Asher. "You take no risk at all in leaving, so you'll go first, I suppose?"

All this time the settlers' wives sat listening to the considerations that meant so much to them. They wore calico dresses, and not one of them had on a hat. But their sunbonnets were clean and stiffly starched, and, while they were

humbly clad, there was not a stupid face among them; neither was their conversation stupid. Their homes and home devices for improvement, the last reading in the all too few papers that came their way, the memories of books and lectures and college life of other days, and the hope of the future, were among the things of which they spoke.

Virginia Aydelot was no longer the pretty pink and white girl-bride who had come to the West three years before. Her face and arms were brown as a gypsy's, but her hair, rumpled by the white sunbonnet she had worn, was abundant, and her dark eyes and the outlines of her face had not changed. She would always be handsome without regard to age or locality. Nor had the harshness of the wilderness made harsh the soft Southern tongue that was her heritage.

At Stewart's words, Asher glanced at his wife, and he knew from her eyes what her choice would be.

"When I was a boy on the old farm back at Cloverdale, Ohio, my mother's advice was as useful to me as my father's." Swift through Asher's mind ran the memory of that moonlit April night on his father's veranda five years before. "Out here it is our wives who bear the heaviest burdens. Let us have their thoughts on the situation."

"That's right," Jim Shirley exclaimed. "Mrs. Aydelot, you are first in point of time in this settlement. What do you say?"

"It's a big responsibility, Mrs. Aydelot," Bennington, who had not smiled hitherto, said with a twinkle in his eye.

"As goes Asher Aydelot, so goes Grass River," Todd

Stewart declared. "You speak for him, Mrs. Aydelot, and tell us what to do."

"I cannot tell *you* what to do. I can speak only for the Aydelots," Virginia said. "When we came West Asher told me he had left one bridge not burned. He had put aside enough money to take us back to Ohio and to start a new life, on small dimensions, of course, back East, whenever we found the prairies too hostile. They've often been rough, never worse than now, but"—her eyes were bright with the unconquerable will to do as she pleased, true heritage of the Thaines of old—"but I'm not ready to go yet."

Jim Shirley clapped his hands, but Pryor Gaines spoke earnestly. "There is no failure in a land where the women will to win. By them the hearthstones stand or crumble to dust. The Plains are master now. They must be servant some day."

"Amen!" responded Asher Aydelot, and the Sabbath service ended.

Two weeks later Darley Champers came again to the barren valley and met the settlers in the sod schoolhouse. Not a cloud had yet scarred the heavens, not a dewdrop had glistened in the morning sunlight. Clearly, August was outranking July as king of a season of glaring light and withering heat. The settlers drooped listlessly on the backless seats, and the barefoot children did not even try to recite the golden text.

"I'd like to speak to you, Aydelot," Champers said at the door, as the school service ended.

The two men sought the shady side of the cabin and dropped on the ground.

"I'm goin' to be plain, now, and you must n't misunderstand me for a minute," Champers declared. The blusterer is rarely tactful.

"All right."

Champers seemed to take the cheery tone as a personal matter.

"Two weeks ago, I understand you and Mrs. Aydelot headed off these poor devils from their one chance of escape. Now, you know danged well you *don't* intend to stay here a minute longer'n it'll take to kite out of this in the fall. And you are sacrificing human lives by persuadin' these folks to hold onto this land they just can't keep, nor make a livin' on, under five years and pay the interest till their mortgages expire. And I've just this to say:" Champers spoke persuasively. "I'm not a shark. I'm humane. If you'll help me to get these poor settlers out of Grass River Valley, I'm willing to pay you a good commission on every single claim and take no commission at all on yours. It will help you a lot toward makin' a bigger start back East. Don't listen to your woman now; listen to me, for I'm givin' you the chance of your life, robbin' myself to do it, too. But"—his tone changed abruptly—"if you figger you can take your danged rainy-day bank account out'n the Cloverdale bank and grab onto this land, you leave yourself, and hold onto it while you stay East a few years, and then sneak back here and get rich off their loss, I tell you now, you can't do it. And if you don't use your influence right now to get 'em to sell out to my company, you're going to regret it. Don't ask how I know. I *know*. I warn you once for all. You go in there and help the men decide right now—I'll buy at a

reasonable figger, you understand—and you're goin' to help make 'em sell to save their fool skins from starvation and their wives and their little ones, or you're going to rue the day you drove into Kansas. What do you say? What are you goin' to do?"

The man's voice was full of menace, and he looked at Asher Aydelot with the determination of one who will not be thwarted.

Asher looked back at him with clear gray eyes that saw deeper than the threatening words. A half smile hovered about his lips as he replied.

"So that's your game, Darley Champers. If I'll help you to get hold of this land, you'll pay the settlers more than the claims are worth and you'll pay me more than they are worth. A pretty good price for worthless ground."

"Well, look at the landscape and tell me what you see." Darley Champers flung his hand out toward the sweep of brown prairie with the dry river bed and the brazen sands beyond it. Lean cattle stood disconsolately in the shadeless open, while the cultivated fields were a mass of yellow clods about the starveling crops.

Asher did not heed the interruption.

"You declare that I'll leave here as soon as I can get away, and that I'm brutal to use my influence to keep the settlers here; that I am working a trick *you* have worked out already for me, to get the land myself because it is valuable; you, in your humane love for your fellowmen, you threaten me with all unknown calamities if I refuse your demand. And then you ask me what I have to say, what I am going to do, and, with fine gestures, what I see?"

"Well?" Champers queried urgently.

The plains life made men patient and deliberate of speech, and Asher did not hasten his words for all the bluster.

"I say I am not using my influence to keep any man here or push him out of here. I speak only for the family at the Sunflower Inn. I know 'danged well' I am not going to leave the Grass River country this fall. Further, I know your hand before you play it, and I know that if you can play it against Todd Stewart and Jim Shirley and Cyrus Bennington and the rest of them, I haven't taken their measure right. I know, again, that I am not afraid of you, nor can any threat you make have an influence on my action. And, lastly, as to what I see."

Asher turned toward the west where the hot air quivered between the iron earth and a sky of brass.

"I see a land fair as the garden of Eden, with grazing herds on broad meadows, and fields on fields of wheat, and groves and little lakes and rivers, a land of comfortable homes and schools and churches — and no saloons nor breweries."

"I see a danged fool," Darley Champers cried, springing up.

"Come down here in twenty-five years and make a hunt for me, then," Asher said with a smile, but Champers had already plunged inside the schoolhouse.

The council following was a brief one. Three or four Grass River settlers agreed to give up the equity on their claims of one hundred and sixty acres for enough money to transport themselves and their families to their former homes east of the Mississippi River. This decision left

only one child of all the little ones there, Todd Stewart, a stubby little fellow, as much of a Scotchman as his fair-haired father, who wound one arm about his father's neck, and whispered:

"They can't budge us, can they, dad?"

When the matter was concluded, Darley Champers rose to his feet.

"I want to say one thing," he began doggedly. "I give you the chance. Don't never blame me because you are too green to know what's good for you. You are the only green things here, though. And don't forget, there ain't a man of you can get out of here on your own income or on your own savin's. Not a one. You're all locked into this valley an' the key's in purgatory. An' I'd see you all with the key before I'd ever lift a finger to help one of you, and not a one of you can help yourselves."

With these words Champers left the company and rode away up the trail toward civilization and safety.

In the silence that followed, Pryor Gaines said:

"Friends, let us not forget that this is the Sabbath day on the prairie as in the crowded city. Let us not leave until we ask for His blessing in whose sight no sparrow falls unnoticed."

And together the little band of resolute men and women offered prayer to Him whose is the earth and the fulness, or the emptiness, thereof.

Four days and nights went by. On the fifth morning at daybreak the cool breeze that sweeps the prairies in the early dawn flowed caressingly along the Grass River valley. The settlers rose early. This was the best part of the day, and they made use of it.

"You poor Juno!" Virginia Aydelot said, as she leaned against the corral post in the morning twilight, and patted the mare gently.

"You and I are 'plains-broke' for certain. We don't care for hot winds, nor cold winds, nor prairie fire, nor even a hailstorm, if it would only come. Never mind, old Juno, Asher has the greenest fields of all the valley because he hasn't stopped plowing. That's why you must keep on working. Maybe it will rain today, and you'll get to rest. Rain and rest!"

She looked toward the shadowy purple west, and then away to the east, decked in the barbaric magnificence of a plains sunrise.

"It may rain today, but it won't rain rain. It will be hot air and trouble. The sod shack is cool, anyhow, Juno. Not so cool, though, as that little glen in the mountains where the clear spring bubbles and babbles all day long." She brushed her hair back from her forehead and, squeezing Juno's mane, she added, "We don't want to go back yet, though. Not yet, do we, Juno, even if it rains trouble instead of rain? Inherited pride and the will to do as we please make us defy the plains, still."

The day was exceedingly hot, but by noon a cloud seemed rising in the northwest; not a glorious, black thunder-cloud that means cool wind and sharp lightning and a shower of longed-for rain. A yellow-gray cloud with no deeper nor shallower tints to it, rising steadily, moving swiftly, shut off the noonday glare. The shadows deepened below this strange un-cloud-like cloud, not dark, but dense. The few chickens in the settlement mistook the clock and went to roost. At every settler's house, wonder-

ing eyes watched the unheard-of phenomenon, so like, yet utterly unlike, the sun's eclipse.

"Listen, Asher," Virginia exclaimed, as the two stood on the low swell behind the house. "Listen to the roar, but there's no wind nor thunder."

"Hear that rasping edge to the rumble. It isn't like anything I ever knew," Asher said, watching the coming cloud intently.

From their height they could see it sweeping far across the land, not high in the air, but beclouding the prairie like a fog. Only this thing was dry and carried no cool breath with it. Nearer it came, and the sun above looked wanly through it, as surging, whipping, shimmering with silver splinters of light, roaring with the whir of grating wings, countless millions of grasshoppers filled the earth below and the air above.

"The plague of Egypt," Asher cried, and he and Virginia retreated hastily before its force.

But they were not swift enough. The mosquito netting across the open windows was eaten through and the hopping, wriggling, flying pest surged inside. They smeared greasily on the floor; they gnawed ravenously at every bit of linen or cotton fabric; they fell into every open vessel.

Truly, life may be made miserable in many ways, but in the Kansas homes in that memorable grasshopper year of 1874 life was wretchedly uncomfortable. Out of doors the cloud was a disaster. Nor flood, nor raging wind nor prairie fire, nor unbroken drouth could claim greater measure of havoc in its wake than this billion-footed, billion-winged creature, an appetite grown measureless, a hunger

vitalized, and individualized, and endowed with power of motion. No living shred of grass, or weed, or stalk of corn, or straw of stubble or tiniest garden growth; no leaf or bit of tender bark of tree, or shrub, escaped this many-mouthed monster.

In the little peach orchard where there were a few half-ripe peaches, the very first fruits of the orchards in this untamed land, the hard peach stones, from which the meat was eaten away, hung on their stems among the leafless branches. The weed-grown bed of Grass River was swept as by a prairie fire. And for the labor of the fields, nothing remained. The cottonwood trees and wild plum bushes belonged to a mid-winter landscape, and of the many young catalpa groves, only stubby sticks stood up, making a darker spot on the face of the bare plains.

For three days the Saint Bartholomew of vegetation continued. Then the pest, still hungry, rose and passed to the southeast, leaving behind it only a honey-combed soil where eggs were deposited for future hatching, and a famine-breeding desolation.

In days of great calamity or sorrow, sometimes little things annoy strangely, and it is not until after the grief has passed that the memory recalls and the mind wonders why trifles should have had such power amid such vastly important things. While the grasshopper was a burden, one loss wore heavily on Virginia Aydelot's mind. She had given up hope for vines and daintier flowers in the early summer, but one clump of coarse sunflowers she had tended and watered and loved.

"It is our flower," she said to Asher, who laughed at her care. "I won't give them up. I can get along without the

other blooms this year, but my sunflowers are my treasure here — the only gold till the wheat turns yellow for us."

"You are a sentimental sister," Asher declared. But he patiently carried water from the dwindling well supply to keep the drouth from searing them. When they fell before the ravenous grasshoppers, foolish as it was, Virginia mourned their loss above the loss of crops — so scanty were the joys of these women state builders.

The day after the pests left was the Sabbath. When Asher Aydelot read the morning lesson in the Sunday school, his voice was deep and unfaltering. He had chosen the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy, with its sublime promises to a wilderness-locked people.

Then Pryor Gaines offered prayer.

"Although the figtree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines" — the old, old chant of Habakkuk on Mount Shigionoth — "the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He will make my feet like hind's feet, and He will make me to walk upon mine high places."

So the scholarly man, crippled and held to the land, prayed; and comfort came with his words.

Then Jim Shirley stood up to sing.

"I'm no preacher," he said, holding the song book open a moment, "but I do believe the Lord loves the fellow who can laugh at his own hard luck. We weren't so green as Darley Champers tried to have us believe, because the hoppers didn't bite at us when they took every other green

and growing thing, and we have life enough in us to keep on growing. Furthermore, we aren't the only people that have been pest-ridden. It's even worse up on Big Wolf Creek, where Wyker's short on corn to feed his brewery this fall. I'm going to ask everyone who is still glad he's in the Grass River settlement in Kansas to stand up and sing just like he meant it. It's the old Portuguese hymn. Asher and I learned it back on Clover Creek in Ohio.

> How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
> Is laid for your faith—in His excellent word!"

Every man and woman rose at once.

"The 'ayes' have it," Jim declared.

Then strong and sweet the song floated out across the desolate drouth-ridden, pest-despoiled prairie. The same song was sung that day, no doubt, where many worshipers were met together. The same song, sung in country chapel and city church; in mining villages, and in lonely lumber camps; on vessels far out at sea, and in the missionary service of distant heathen lands; by sick beds in humble homes, and beneath the groined arches of the Old World cathedrals.

But nowhere above the good green sod of Christendom did it rise in braver, truer worship from trustful and unconquered hearts than it rose that day in the little sod schoolhouse on the Kansas prairie, pouring its melody down the wide spaces of the Grass River Valley.

CHAPTER VII

The Last Bridge Burned

. . . Scores of better men had died.
I could reach the township living, but—He knew what terrors tore me—
But I didn't! But I didn't! I went down the other side.
—*The Explorer.*

PRYOR GAINES never preached a better sermon than the one that followed the singing of that old Portuguese hymn; and there were no doleful faces in that little company when the service closed. The men stopped long enough to discuss the best crops to put in for the fall, and how and where they might get seeds for the same; to consider ways for destroying the eggs left by the grasshoppers in the honey-combed ground, and to trade help in the wheat-breaking to begin the next day. The women lingered to plan a picnic dinner for the coming Saturday. Jim Shirley hummed an old love tune as he helped Pryor Gaines to close the windows and door for the week. Only little Todd Stewart, with sober face, scratched thoughtfully at the hard earth with his hard little toes.

"Can't there be no more little children where there's grasshoppers and Darley Champerses?" he asked his mother.

"Yes, yes, Todd. You won't be lonesome long," his mother assured him. "Some time when you are a man you can say, 'I was the only little boy the grasshoppers and Darley Champers didn't get.' You stout little Trojan!"

And then Todd, too, caught the spirit of the day and

went singing blithely away. Across the bare hollow of Grass River, and beyond the sand dunes into the brown wastes that had been grassy prairies, his young voice came trailing back still singing, as he rode behind his father, following the long hot trail toward their home. And the other settlers went their ways, each with courage renewed, for the new week's work.

Yet, they were lonesomely few in number, and the prairies were vast; they were poverty-stricken, with little means by which to sustain life through the coming season; on every hand the desolate plains lay robbed of every green growth, and to this land they were nailed hand and foot as to a cross of crucifixion. But they were young. They believed in the West and in themselves. Their faces were set toward the future. They had voted themselves into holding on, and, except for the Aydelots, no one family had more resource than another. The Aydelots could leave the West if they chose. But they did not choose. So together they laughed at hardship; they made the most of their meager possessions; they helped each other as one family — and they trusted to Providence for the future. And Providence, albeit she shows a seamy side to poverty, still loves the man who laughs at hard luck. The seasons following were not unkind. The late summer rains, the long autumn, and the mild winter were blessings. But withal, there were days on days of real hunger. Stock died for lack of encouragement to live without food. And the grim while of waiting for seed time and signs of prosperity was lived through with that old Anglo-Saxon tenacity that has led the English speaking peoples to fight and colonize to the ends of the earth.

"Virginia," Asher said one noontime, as the two sat at their spare meal, "the folks are coming up tonight to hold a council. I saw Bennington this morning and he had heard from the men over Todd Stewart's way. Dust the piano, polish up the chandelier, and decorate with — smiles," he added, as he saw the shadow on his wife's face.

"I'll have the maid put the reception room in order," Virginia replied, with an attempt at merriment.

Then through the long afternoon she fought to a finish with the yearning for the things she missed daily. At supper time, however, she was the same cheery woman who had laughed at loss and lack so often that she wondered sometimes if abundance might not really make her sad.

In the evening the men sat on the ground about the door of the Sunflower Inn. Their wives had not come with them. One woman was sick at home; little Todd Stewart was at the beginning of a fever, and the other women were taking turns at nursing. Virginia's turn had been the night before. She was weary now and she sat in the doorway listening to the men, and remembering how on just such a moonlit September night she and Asher had sat together under the Sign of the Sunflower and planned a future of wealth and comfort.

"The case is desperate," Cyrus Bennington was saying. "Sickness and starvation and the horses failing every day and the need for all the plowing and getting winter fuel. Something must be done."

Others agreed, citing additional needs no less pressing.

"There are supplies and money coming from the East right now," Jim Shirley declared. "A hunting party crossed south two days ago. I was down on lower Plum

Creek searching for firewood, and I met them. They said we might get help from Wykerton if we went up right away."

"Well, you are Mr. Swift, Jim," one of the men exclaimed. "If you knew it two days ago, why in thunder didn't you report. We'd have made a wooden horse gallop to Wykerton before night."

"How'd I round up the neighborhood? I didn't get home till nearly noon today. And, besides, they said Darley Champers has the distributing of the supplies and money, and he's putting it where it will do the most good, not giving to everybody alike, he says."

A sudden blankness fell upon each face, as each recalled the last words of Champers when he left them on the Sabbath day in August.

"Well, you said a wooden horse could have galloped up to Wykerton." Jim Shirley tried to speak cheerfully. "A horse of iron might, too, but who's got a critter in Grass River Valley right now that could make a trip like that? Mine couldn't. It took me two days and a half to haul up a load of stuff, mostly sunflower stalks, that I gathered down south."

"Aydelot's black mare could do it if anything could," Pryor Gaines declared, trying to speak cheerfully, yet he was the least able to meet the hardships of that season.

"Yes, maybe," Shirley commented. "She's a thoroughbred, and they finally win, you know. But knowing what you do, who of you wants to face Darley Champers?"

Again a hopeless despair filled the hearts of the little company. Todd Stewart clinched his hands together. The husband of the sick woman set his jaws like iron. Pryor

Gaines turned his face away and offered no further word. Asher Aydelot sat looking out across the prairie, touched to silvery beauty by the pitying moonlight, and Jim Shirley bowed his head and said nothing.

"I will go to Wykerton," Virginia Aydelot's soft voice broke the silence. "I'll take Juno and go tomorrow morning. If Darley Champers refuses me, he would do the same to you."

"Oh, Mrs. Aydelot, will you go? Can you try it? Do you think you could do it?" The questions came from the eager settlers.

"We'll try it, Juno and I," Virginia replied.

"Thoroughbreds, both of 'em," Jim Shirley murmured under his breath, and Pryor Gaines' face expressed the things he could not say.

"I believe that is the best thing to do," Asher Aydelot declared.

Then the settlers said good night, and sought their homes.

As Virginia Aydelot rode away in the early morning, the cool breeze came surging to her out of the west. The plains were more barren than she had ever seen them before, but the sky above them had lost nothing of its beauty. No color had faded from the eastern horizon line, no magnificence had slipped away from the sunset.

"'The heavens declare the glory of God,'" Virginia said to herself. "Has He forgotten the earth which is His also?"

She turned at the little swell to the northward to wave good-by to Asher, standing with arms folded beside a corral post, looking after her.

"Is he thinking of Cloverdale and the big cool farmhouse and the well-kept farm, and the many people coming and going along that old National pike road? He gave it all up for me — all his inheritance for me and this."

She looked back once more at the long slope of colorless land and the solitary figure watching her in the midst of it all.

"I'll tell him tonight I'm ready to go back East. We can go to Ohio, and Asher can live where his boyhood days were spent. My Virginia can never be as it was in my childhood, but Asher can have some of the pleasures of his eastern home." She pushed back the sunbonnet from her face, and let the west breeze sweep across it.

"I used to wear a veil and was somewhat acquainted with cold cream, and my hands were really white and soft. They are hard and brown now. When I get home I'll put it straight to Asher about going back to civilization, even if there are only a few dollars waiting to take us there, and nothing waiting for us to do."

With a sigh, half of anticipation and half of regret, she rode away toward the little town of Wykerton in the Big Wolf Creek settlement.

There were few differences between the new county seat and Carey's Crossing, except that there were a few more houses, and over by the creek bank the brewery, by which Hans Wyker proposed to save the West. There was, however, one difference between the vanished Carey's Crossing and this place, the difference between the community whose business leaders have ideals of citizenship, and the community wherein commerce is advanced by the degradation of its citizens. Wykerton had no Dr. Carey nor John

Jacobs to control it. The loafers stared boldly at Virginia Aydelot as she rode up before the livery stable and slipped from her saddle. Not because a woman in a calico dress and sunbonnet, a tanned, brown-handed woman, was a novelty there, but because the license of the place was one of impudence and disrespect.

The saloon was on one side of the livery stable and the postoffice was on the other side. Darley Champers' office stood next to the postoffice, a dingy little shack with much show of maps and real estate information. Behind the office was a large barren yard where one little lilac bush languished above the hard earth. The Wyker hotel and store were across the street.

Virginia had been intrusted with small sums for sundry purchases for the settlement, especially for the staple medicines and household needs — camphor and turpentine, quinine and certain cough syrups for the winter; castor oil, some old and tried ointment, and brand of painkiller; thread and needles and pins — especially pins — and buttons for everybody's clothes. One settler had ridden back at midnight to ask for the purchase of a pair of shoes for his wife. It was a precious commission that Virginia Aydelot bore that day, although to the shopper in a Kansas city today, the sum of money would have seemed pitifully small.

In the postoffice, printed rulings and directions regarding the supplies were posted on the wall, and Virginia read them carefully. Then with many misgivings and a prayer for success, she crossed the street to Darley Champers' place of business.

In spite of her plain dress, Virginia Aydelot was every inch a lady, and Darley Champers, dull as he was in certain

lines, felt the difference her presence made in the atmosphere of his office when she entered there.

"I understood, Mr. Champers, that you have charge here of the supplies sent into the state for the relief of those who suffered from the grasshoppers," she said, when she was seated in the dingy little room.

"Yes, mom!" Champers replied.

"I am Mrs. Asher Aydelot, and I represent the Grass River settlement. I have come to ask for a share of this relief fund, and as I must start back as soon as possible after dinner, perhaps we can make all arrangements now."

She never knew how near her gentle manner and pleasant voice came to winning the day at once. Champers' first impulse was to grant her anything she asked for; his second was to refuse everything; his third, his ruling principle always, was to negotiate to his own advantage. He dropped his eyes and began to play for time.

"I don't know as I can help you at all, madam," he said, half sympathetically. "The supplies and money is about gone, except what's promised, and, well — you ought to have come sooner. I'd a been glad to help you, but I thought you Grass River folks had about everything you needed for the winter."

"Oh, Mr. Champers," Virginia cried, "you know that nobody could foretell the coming of the plague. We were as well off as hundreds of other settlers this dry summer before the grasshoppers came."

"Yes, yes, madam, but the supplies is gone, about."

"And you cannot promise that any more will be coming soon?" The pathos of the woman's voice was appealing.

"If you could only understand how poor and how brave those settlers are!"

"I thought your man had some little means to get you and him away, if he'd use it that way."

The sorrow of failure here and the suffering that must follow it made Virginia sick at heart. A homesick longing suddenly possessed her; a wish to get away from the country and forget it altogether. And Champers was cunning enough to understand.

"You'd just like to get away from it, now, wouldn't you?" he asked persuasively.

"I surely would, when I think of the suffering there will be," Virginia replied. "Our staying won't help matters any."

"Not a bit! Not a bit," Champers asserted. "It's too bad you can't go."

Virginia looked up wonderingly.

"Madam, I haven't no supplies. They're all gone, I think. But if you'll come in right after dinner, I'll see if I can't do something. I'm a humane man."

"I'll be here at one o'clock," she replied.

It was the last hope, and anything was better than utter failure in her errand.

When she registered her name at the hotel for dinner, Virginia's eye was caught by the two names on the page. Both belonged to strangers, but it was the sharp contrast of the writing that made her read them. One recorded in a cramped little hand the name of Thomas Smith, Wilmington, Delaware. The other in big, even, backward slanting letters spelled out the name of John Jacobs, Cincinnati, Ohio.

The dining room was crowded with men when Virginia entered. Whoever is hunting for evidence of good breeding and unselfishness, must not expect too much in any eating-house, be it dining car on the Empire Limited or grub shack on the western frontier, if only men are accustomed to feed there. The best places were filled with noisy talkers and eaters, who stared at her indifferently, and it was not until Gretchen Wyker, tow-haired, pimpled, and short-necked like her father, chose to do so, that she finally pointed out a chair at a shabby side table and waved her empty tin waiter toward it. Virginia was passing the long table of staring men to reach this seat, when a man rose from the small table at the other side of the room and crossed hastily to her.

"Excuse me, madam," he said politely. "Will you come over to our table? We are strangers to you, but you will get better service here than you might get alone. My name is Jacobs. I saw you in the store this morning, and I know nearly every man in your settlement.

It was a small service, truly, but to Virginia it was a grateful one in that embarrassing moment.

"You can take Dr. Carey's place. He's away today, locating a claim on the upper fork of Grass River somewhere. He hasn't been back a month, but he's busy as ever. Tell me about your neighborhood," Jacobs said.

Virginia told the story of the community that differed little from the story of the whole frontier line of Kansas settlements in the early seventies.

"Do you have hope of help through Mr. Champers?" Jacobs asked.

"I don't know what to hope for from Mr. Champers. He seems kind-hearted," Virginia replied.

"I hope you will find him a real friend. He is pretty busy with a man from the East today," Jacobs answered, with a face so neutral in its expression that Virginia wondered what his thought might be.

As she rose to leave the table, Mr. Jacobs said:

"I shall be interested in knowing how you succeed this afternoon. I hope you may not be disappointed. I happen to know that there are funds and goods both on hand. It's a matter of getting them distributed without prejudice."

"You are very kind, Mr. Jacobs," Virginia replied. "It is a desperate case. I feel as if I should be ready to leave the West if I do not get relief for our neighborhood today."

Jacobs looked at her keenly. "Can you go?" he asked. "I wonder you have waited until now."

"I've never wanted to go before. I wouldn't now. I could stand it for our household." The dark eyes flashed with the old Thaine will to do as she pleased. "But it is my sympathy for other people, for our sick, for discouraged men."

Jacobs smiled kindly and bowed as she left the room.

When she returned to Champers' office Mr. Thomas Smith was already there, his small frame and narrow, close-set eyes and secretive manner seeming out of place in the breezy atmosphere of the plain, outspoken West of the settlement days. In the conversation that followed it seemed to Virginia that he controlled all of the real estate dealer's words.

"I am sorry to say that there ain't anything left in the

way of supplies, Mrs. Aydelot, except what's reserved for worthy parties. I've looked over things carefully." Darley Champers broke the silence at once.

"Who draws the line between the worthy and the unworthy, Mr. Champers?" Virginia asked. "I am told the relief supply is not exhausted."

"Oh, the distributin's in my hands in a way, but that don't change matters," Champers said.

"I read the rulings in the postoffice," Virginia began.

"Yes, I had 'em put there. It saves a lot of misunderstandin'," the guardian of supplies declared. "But it don't change anything here."

Virginia knew that her case was lost and she rose to leave the room. She had instinctively distrusted Darley Champers from their first meeting. She had disliked him as an ill-bred, blustering sort of man, but she had not thought him vindictive until now. Now she saw in him a stubborn, unforgiving man, small enough to work out of petty spite to the complete downfall of any who dared oppose his plans.

"Sit down, Mrs. Aydelot. As I said this mornin', it's too bad you can't go back East now," Champers said seriously.

"We can." Virginia could not keep back the words.

Champers and Smith exchanged glances.

"No, mom, you can't, Mrs. Aydelot. Let me show you why."

He opened the drawer of his rickety desk and out of a mass of papers he fished up a copy of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, six weeks old. "Look at this," and he thrust it into Virginia's hand.

The head-lines were large, but the story was brief. The

failure of the Cloverdale bank, the disappearance of the trusted cashier, the loss of deposits — a story too common to need detail. Virginia Aydelot never knew until that moment how much that reserve fund had really meant to her. She had need of the inherited pride of the Thaines now.

"The papers are not always accurate," she said quietly.

"No, mom. But Mr. Smith here has interests in Cloverdale. He's just come from there, and he says it's even worse than this states it."

Virginia looked toward Mr. Smith, who nodded assent.

"The failure is complete. Fortunately, I lost but little," he said.

"Why hasn't Mr. Aydelot been notified?" she demanded.

"It does seem queer he wasn't," Thomas Smith assented.

Something in his face made Virginia distrust him more than she distrusted Darley Champers.

"Now, Mrs. Aydelot, seein' your last bridge is burned, I'm humane enough to help you. You said this mornin' you wanted to get away. Mr. Smith and I control some funds together, and he's willing to take Shirley's place and I'll give you a reasonable figger, not quite so good as I could 'a done previous to this calamity — but I'll take the Aydelot place off your hands." Champers smiled triumphantly.

"The Aydelot place is not for sale. Good afternoon." And Virginia left the office without more words.

When she was gone Champers turned to Smith with a growl.

"It's danged hard to turn agin a woman like her. What made you so bitter?"

Smith half grinned and half snarled in reply:

"Oh, her neighbor, Shirley, you know."

Hopeless and crushed, Virginia sat down on the bench before the Wyker House to wait for Juno to be brought to her from the stables. The afternoon sun was beginning to creep under the roof shading the doorway. Before her the dusty street ran into the dusty trail leading out to the colorless west. It was the saddest moment she had known in the conflict with the wilderness.

"Thy shoes shall be iron and brass," ran the blessing of Asher through her mind. "It must be true today as in the desert long ago. And Asher lives by the memory of his mother's blessing." The drooping shoulders lifted. The dark eyes brightened.

"I won't give up. I'm glad the money's gone," she declared to herself. "We did depend on it so long as we knew we had it."

"What luck, Mrs. Aydelot?" It was John Jacobs who spoke as he sat down beside her.

"All bad luck, but we are not discouraged," she replied bravely, and Jacobs read the whole story in the words.

A silence fell. Virginia sat looking at the vacant street, while the young man studied her face. Then Juno was brought to the door and Virginia rose to mount her.

"Mrs. Aydelot," John Jacob's sharp eyes seemed to pierce to her very soul as he said slowly, "I believe you are not discouraged. You believe in this country, you, and your neighbors. I believe in it, and I believe in you. Stewart and I had to dissolve partnership when Carey's Crossing dissolved. He took a claim. It was all he could do. I went back to Cincinnati, but only for a time. I'm ready to start again. I will organize a company of town

builders, not brewery builders. You must not look for favors in a whisky-ridden place like this. There'll be no saloon to rule our town."

Virginia listened interestedly but not understandingly.

"What of this?" Jacobs continued. "I have some means. I'm waiting for more. I'll invest them in Grass River. Go back and tell your homesteaders that I'll make a small five-year loan to every man in the settlement according to his extreme needs. I'll take each man's note with five per cent interest and the privilege of renewing for two years if crops fail at the end of the term. I am selfish, I'll admit," he declared, as Virginia looked at him incredulously, "and I want dollar for dollar — always — sometimes more. My people are popularly known as Shylocks. But you note that my rate of usury is small, the time long, and that I want these settlers to stay. I am not trying to get rid of them in order to speculate on their land in coming days of prosperity — the days when you will be landlords over broad acres and I a merchant prince. I say again, I believe in the West and in you farmer people who must turn the West from a wilderness to a land of plenty. I'm willing to risk something on your venture."

"Oh, Mr. Jacobs," was all Virginia could say, and, womanlike, the tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

"Tell the men to send a committee up here with their needs listed," Jacobs said hastily, "or better, I'll go out there myself the day after tomorrow. I want to see what kind of a claim Carey has preempted. Goodby, now, goodby."

He hurried Virginia to her horse and watched her ride away.

Down at the ford of Wolf Creek the willow brush fringed the main trail thinly for a little distance and half hid the creek trail, winding up a long canyon-like hollow, until a low place in the bank and a steep climb brought it up to the open prairie. It was the same trail that Dr. Carey had spoken of as belonging to an ugly little creek running into Big Wolf, the trail he had wanted to avoid on the day he had heard Virginia singing when she was lost on the prairie one cold day.

Virginia paused in this semblance of shade to let Juno drink. She pushed back her sunbonnet and sat waiting. Her brown face grew radiant as she thought of the good news she was bearing to the waiting home-makers of the Grass River Valley. A song came to her lips, and as she sang a soft little measure she remembered how somewhere down a tributary to this very creek she had sung for help in pleading tones one cold hopeless day three years before. So intent was she on the triumph of the hour she did not even look up the willow-shadowed creek trail.

Dr. Horace Carey, coming in from a distant claim, had dropped into this trail for the bits of shade here and there and was letting his pony take its way leisurely along the side of the creek bed. There were only a few shallow pools now where the fall rains would soon put a running stream, and as the doctor's way lay along the moist places the pony's feet fell noiselessly on the soft ground. As he rounded a bend in the stream he caught sight of Virginia, her face outlined against the background of willow sprays, making a picture worth a journey to see, it was such a

hopeful, happy face at that moment. Dr. Carey involuntarily checked his pony at the sight. His own countenance was too pale for a Kansas plainsman, and he sat so still that the low strain of Virginia's song reached his ears.

Presently Juno lifted her head and Virginia rode away out on the Sunflower Trail, bordered now only by dead pest-ridden stalks. Suddenly lifting her eyes she saw far across a stretch of burned prairie a landscape of exquisite beauty. In a foreground lay a little lake surrounded by grassy banks and behind it, on a slight elevation, stood a mansion house of the old Colonial style with white pillared portico, and green vines and forest trees casting cool shade. Beyond it, wrapped in mist, rose a mountain height with a road winding picturesquely in and out along its side. Virginia caught her breath as a great sob rose in her throat. This was all so like the old Thaine mansion house of her childhood years.

"It's only the mirage," she said aloud. "But it was so like — what?" She held Juno back as she looked afar at the receding painting of the plains. "It's like the house we'll have some day on that slope beyond the Sunflower Inn. The mountains are misty. They are only the mountains of memory. But the home and the woods and the water — all may be real."

Then she thought of Asher and of the dull prairie everywhere.

"I wonder if he would want to go back if he could see this as I see it," she questioned. "But I know he has seen it daily. I can tell by that look in his gray eyes."

It was long after moonrise when Asher Aydelot, watching by the corral, heard the sound of hoof-beats and saw

the faint outline of a horse and rider swinging in from the northward as once before he had watched the same horse and rider swinging over the same trail before the cool north wind that beat back the September prairie fire.

"I have supper all ready. See what grew just for you!" Asher said as he and his wife entered the house.

A bunch of forlorn little sunflowers in a brown pitcher graced the table. They could scarcely be called flowers, but to Virginia, who had hardly seen a blossom through the days of drouth, the joy they brought was keener than the joy that the roses and orchids gave in the days of a later prosperity.

"I found them in the draw where the wild plums grow," Asher said. "How they ever escaped the hoppers is a miracle."

"We will christen our claim 'The Sunflower Ranch' tonight, and these are our decorations for the ceremony. It is all we have now. But it is ours," Virginia declared.

And then she told the story of the bank failure at Cloverdale.

"The last bridge is burned surely," Asher commented as he looked across the table at Virginia. "This is the only property we have except youth and health and hope —and—each other."

"And the old Aydelot heritage to stand for principle, and your mother's belief in the West and in you, and the Thaine stubbornness about giving up what they want to keep," Virginia declared.

"As our days so shall our strength be," Asher added, as he saw his wife's face bright with hope and determination, and remembered the sweet face of his mother as it

had looked that night on the veranda of the old farm-house by the National pike road.

For a long time down by the willows thinly shadowing Wolf Creek a white-faced man sat looking out toward the west, where a horse and rider had vanished into the mellow tones of distance.

CHAPTER VIII

Anchored Hearthstones

Dear Mother of Christ, who motherhood blessed,
  All life in thy Son is complete.
The length of a day, the century's tale
  Of years do His purpose repeat.
As wide as the world a sympathy comes
  To him who has kissed his own son,
A tenderness deep as the depths of the sea,
  To motherhood mourning is won.
No life is for naught. It was heaven's own way
That the baby who came should stay only a day.

LIVING by faith, which is the substance of things hoped for, is good for the spirit but reducing to the flesh. Yet it was much by faith that the frontier settlers lived through the winter after the grasshopper raid. Jim Shirley often declared in that time between crops that he could make three meals a day on Pryor Gaines' smile. And Todd Stewart asserted that when the meat was all gone from their larder his family lived one whole week on John Jacobs' belief in the future of their settlement. For the hardship of that winter was heavy. All the more heavy because the settlers were not stupid pauper-bred folk but young men and women of intelligence and culture, whose early lives had known luxuries as well as comforts. But the saving sense of humor, the saving power of belief in themselves, and the saving grace of brotherly love carried them through.

The winter was mercifully mild and the short grass of the prairies was nourishing to the stock that must other-

wise have perished. Late in February a rainfall began that lasted for days and Grass River, rising to its opportunity, drowned all the fords, so that the neighbors on widely separated claims were cut off from each other. No telephones relieved the loneliness of the country dwellers in those days, and each household had to rely on its own resources for all its needs. March came raging in like a lion. All the rain turned to snow and the wind to a polar blast as the one furious blizzard of that season fell upon the plains and for many hours threshed the snow-covered land.

On the night before the coming of the blizzard the light did not go out in the Aydelot cabin. And while the wind and rain without raved at door and window, a faint little cry within told that a new life had come to the world, a baby girl born in the midst of the storm. Morning brought no check to the furious elements. And Asher, who had fought in the front line at Antietam, had forced his way through a storm of Indian arrows out of a death-trap in the foothills of the Rockies, had ministered to men on the plains dying of the Asiatic plague, and had bound up the wounds of men who returned to the battle again, found a new form of heroism that morning in his own little cabin — the heroism of motherhood.

"You must go for help, Asher," Virginia said, smiling bravely. "Leave the baby beside me here. We'll wait till you come back. Little Sweetheart, you are welcome, if you did come with the storm, a little before you were expected." The young mother looked fondly at the tiny face beside her.

"I can't leave you alone, Virgie," Asher insisted.

"But you must." Virginia's voice was full of courage.

"You can go as far as Pryor Gaines' and send him on for you. Little daughter and I will be all right till you come back."

So Asher left her.

Pryor Gaines was waterbound across Grass River. Of the three women living east of the stream one was sick abed, one was kept at home with a sick husband, and the third had gone with her husband to Wykerton for supplies and was stormstaid somewhere along the Sunflower Trail.

"I must go for Jim. Any neighborhood is blessed that has a few good-hearted unmarried folks in it," Asher thought as he braced himself against the driving rain and hurried away.

When he reached home again the fire was low, the house was very quiet, and Virginia's face was white against her pillow.

"Our little daughter is asleep," she said, and turning away she seemed not to hear her husband's voice assuring her that Jim would bring the doctor as soon as possible.

The blizzard was just beginning in the early evening when Jim Shirley fairly blew down the trail from the north. He slipped into the kitchen and passed quietly to the next room. Asher was bending over his wife, who lay in a delirium.

Jim Shirley had one of those sympathetic natures that read the joys and sorrows of their friends without words. One look at Asher told him what had been.

"The doctor was away up Wolf Creek, but I left word with his colored man for him to come at once, and he'll do it," Jim assured Asher as he stood for a moment beside the bed. "I didn't wait because you need me."

Asher lifted his head and looked at Jim. As man to man they knew as never before the strength of their lifetime friendship.

"I need you. She needs the doctor. The baby—"

"Doesn't need any of us," Jim said softly. "I'll do what I can."

It is no strange, unreal story of the wilderness day, this fluttering in and out of a little life, where no rosewood grew for coffins nor florists made broken columns of white lilies and immortelles.

But no mother's hands could have been more gentle than the gentle hands of Jim Shirley as he prepared the little form for burial.

Meantime the wind was at its wildest, and the plains blizzard swirled in blinding bitterness along the prairie. The hours of the night dragged by slowly to the two men hoping for the doctor's coming, yet fearing that hope was impossible in the face of such a night.

"Carey has the keenest sense of direction I ever knew in a human being," Jim assured Asher. "I know he will not fail us."

Yet the morning came and the doctor came not. The day differed from the night only in the visible fierceness of the storm. The wind swept howling in long angry shrieks from the northwest. The snow seemed one dizzy, maddening whirlpool of white flakes hanging forever above the earth.

Inside the cabin Virginia's delirium was turning to a frenzy. And Asher and Jim forgot that somewhere in the world that day there was warmth and sunlight, health and happiness, flowers, and the song of birds, and babies

cooing on their mothers' knees. And the hours of the day dragged on to evening.

Meanwhile, Dr. Carey had come into Wykerton belated by the rains.

"The wind is changing. There'll be a snowstorm before morning, Bo Peep," he said wearily as the young colored man assisted him into warm, dry clothes. "It's glorious to sit by a fire on a night like this. I didn't know how tired I was till now."

"Yes, suh, I'se glad you all is home for the night, suh. I sho' is. I got mighty little use for this yuh country. I'se sorry now I eveh done taken my leave of ol' Virginny." Bo Peep's white teeth glistened as he laughed.

"Any calls while I was gone?" Dr. Carey asked.

Bo Peep pretended not to hear as he busied himself over his employer's wraps, until Carey repeated the question.

"No, suh! no, suh! none that kaint wait till mawhnin', suh," Bo Peep assured him, adding to himself, "Tiahd as he is, he's not gwine way out to Grass Riveh this blessed night, not if I loses my job of bein' custodian of this huh 'stablishment. Not long's my name's Bone-ah-gees Peep-ehville, no, suh!"

Dr. Carey settled down for the evening with some inexplicable misgiving he could not overcome.

"I didn't sleep well last night, Bo Peep," he said when he rose late the next morning. "I reckon we doctors get so used to being called out on especially bad nights we can't rest decently in our beds."

"I didn't sleep well, nutheh," Bo Peep replied. "I kep

thinkin' bout that man come heah foh you yestedy. I jes wa'n't gwine to le' yuh go out again las' night."

"What did he want?" the doctor asked, secretly appreciative of Bo Peep's goodness of heart as he saw the street full of whirling snow.

"He done said hit wah a maturity case."

Bo Peep tried to speak carelessly. In truth, his conscience had not left him in peace a moment.

"What do you mean? Who was it?" Horace Carey demanded.

"Don't be mad, Doctah, please don't. Hit wah cuz you all wah done woah out las' night. Hit wah Misteh Shulley from Grass Riveh, suh. He said hit wah Misteh Asheh Aydelot's wife—"

"For the love of God!" Horace Carey cried hoarsely, springing up. "Do you know who Mrs. Aydelot is, Bo Peep?"

"No, suh; neveh see huh."

"She was Virginia Thaine of the old Thaine family back at home."

Bo Peep did not sit down. He fell in a heap at Dr. Carey's feet, moaning grievously.

"Fo' Gawd, I neveh thought o' harm. I jus' thought o' you all, deed I did. Oh! Oh!"

"Help to get me off then," Carey commanded, and Bo Peep flew to his tasks.

When the doctor was ready to start he found two horses waiting outside in the storm and Bo Peep, wrapped to the eyes, beside them.

"Why two?" he asked kindly, for Bo Peep's face was so full of sorrow he could not help pitying the boy.

"Please, kaint I go with you all? I can cook betteh'n Miss Virginia eveh could, an' I can be lots of help an' you all'll need help."

"But it's a stinger of a storm, Bo Peep," the doctor insisted, anxious to be off.

"Neveh mind! Neveh mind! Lemme go. I won't complain of no stom." And the doctor let him go.

It was already dark at the Sunflower Ranch when the two, after hours of battling with wind and snow and bitter cold, reached the cabin door. Bo Peep, instead of giving up early or hanging a dead weight on Dr. Carey's hands, as he had feared the boy might do, had been the more hopeful of the two in all the journey. The hardship was Bo Peep's penance, and right merrily, after the nature of a merry-hearted race, he took his punishment.

Jim Shirley, putting wood on the kitchen fire, bent low as he heard the piteous moanings from the sick room.

"Oh, Lord, if you can work miracles work one now," he pleaded below his breath. "Bring help out of this storm or give us sense to do the best for her. We need her so, dear Lord. We need her so."

He lifted his eyes to see Horace Carey between himself and the bedroom door, slipping out of his snowy coat. And beside him stood Bo Peep, helping him to get ready for the sick room.

"I know Miss Virginia back in the Souf, suh. I done come to take keer of this kitchen depahtment. I know jus' what she lak mos', suh," Bo Peep said to Jim, who had not moved nor spoken. "I'se Misteh Bone-ah-gees Peepehville, an' I done live with Doctah Carey's family all mah life, suh, 'cept a short time I spent in the Jacobs House

at Carey's Crossing. I'se his custodian now, suh, and I know a few things about the cookin' depahtment, suh."

He looked the part, and Jim accepted him gladly.

It is given to some men to know the power of the healing spirit. Dr. Carey was such a man. His presence controlled the atmosphere of the place. There was balm in his voice and in the touch of his hand as much as in his medicines. To him his own calling was divine. Who shall say that the hope and belief with which his few drugs were ministered carried not equal power with them toward health and wholeness?

When Virginia Aydelot had fallen asleep at last the doctor came into the kitchen and sat down with the two haggard men to whom his coming had brought unspeakable solace.

"You can take comfort, Mr. Aydelot," he said assuringly. "Your wife has been well cared for. Hardly one man in a thousand could do as well as you have done. I wonder you never studied medicine."

"You seem confident of results, Doctor," Asher said gratefully.

"I have known the Thaine family all my life," Horace Carey said quietly. And Asher, whose mind was surged with anxiety, did not even think to be surprised.

"We did not recognize each other when I found her on the way to Carey's Crossing three or four years ago, and — I did not know she was married then."

He sat a while in silence, looking at the window against which the wind outside was whirling the snow. When he spoke again his tone was hopeful.

"Mrs. Aydelot has had a nervous shock. But she is

young. She has a heritage of will power and good blood. She will climb up rapidly with the coming on of spring."

How strange it was to Asher Aydelot to listen to such words! He had not slept for fifty hours. It had seemed to him that the dreadful storm outside and sickness and the presence of death within were to be unending, and that in all the world Jim Shirley would henceforth be his only friend.

"You both need sleep," Carey was saying in a matter-of-fact way. Bo Peep will take care of things here, and I will look after Mrs. Aydelot. You will attend to the burial at the earliest possible time in order to save her any signs of grieving. And you will not grieve either until you have more time. And remember, Aydelot," he put his hand comfortingly on Asher's shoulders. "Remember in this affliction that your ambition may stake out claims and set up houses, but it takes a baby's hand to really anchor the hearthstones. And sometimes it takes even more. It needs a little grave as well. I understood from Shirley that some financial loss last fall prevented you from going back to Ohio. You wouldn't leave Grass River now if you could."

Dr. Carey's face was magnetic in its earnestness, and even in the sorrow of the moment Asher remembered that he had known Virginia all her life and he wondered subconsciously why the two had not fallen in love with each other.

And so it was that as the Sunflower Inn had received the first bride and groom to set up the first home in the Grass River Valley, so the first baby born in the valley opened its eyes to the light of day in the same Sunflower

Inn. And out of this sod cabin came the first form to its burial. And it was the Sunflower Ranch that gave ground for God's Acre there for all the years that followed. It happened, too, that as Jim Shirley had been the friendly helper at that bridal supper and happy house-warming more than three years ago, so now it was Jim Shirley who in the hour of sorrow was the helper still.

The winter season passed with the passing of the blizzard. The warm spring air was delicious and all the prairies were presently abloom with a wild luxuriance of flowers.

Asher carried Virginia to the sunshine at the west window from which she could see the beautiful outdoor world.

"We wouldn't leave here now if we could," she declared as she beheld all the glory of the springtime rolling away before her eyes.

"Bank accounts bring comforts, but they do not make all of life nor consecrate death. We have given our firstborn back to the prairie. It is sacred soil now," Asher replied.

And then they talked of many things, but mostly of Dr. Carey.

"I have known him from childhood," Virginia said. "He was my very first sweetheart, as very first sweethearts go. He went into the war when he was young. I didn't know much that happened after that. He was at home, I think, when you were in that hospital where I first saw you, and — oh, yes, Asher, dear, he was at home when your blessed letter came, the one with the old greasy deuce of hearts and the sunflower. It was this same Bo Peep, Carey's boy,

who brought it to me up in the glen behind the big house. Horace left Virginia just after that." Virginia closed her eyes and lived in the past again.

"I wonder you never cared for Dr. Carey, Virgie. He is a prince among men," Asher said, as he leaned over her chair.

"Oh, I might, if my king had not sent me that sunflower just then. It made a new world for me."

"But I am only a common farmer, Virgie, just a king of a Kansas claim, just a home-builder on the prairie," Asher insisted.

"Asher, if you had your choice this minute of all the things you might be, what would you choose to be?" Virginia asked.

"Just a common farmer, just a king of a Kansas claim," Asher replied. Then looking out toward the swell of ground beside the Grass River schoolhouse where the one little mound of green earth marked his firstborn's grave, he added, "Just a home-builder on the prairies."

The second generation of grasshoppers tarried but briefly, then all together took wing and flew away, no man knew, nor cared, whither. And the Grass River settlers who had weathered the hurricane of adversity, poor, but patient and persistent still, planted, sometimes in tears to reap in joy, sometimes in hope to reap only in heartsick hope deferred, but failed not to keep on planting. Other settlers came rapidly and the neighborhood thickened and broadened. And so, amid hardships still, and lack of opportunity and absence of many elements of culture, a sturdy, independent, God-fearing people struggled with the soil, while they lifted up faces full of hope and deter-

mination to the skies above them. What of the prairies they could subdue they bent to their service. What they could not overcome they defied the right to overcome them. There were no lines of social caste. They were needy or full together. They shared their pleasures; together they laughed at calamities; and they comforted one another in every sorrow.

A new town was platted on the claim that Dr. Carey had preempted where the upper fork of Grass River crossed the old Sunflower trail. The town founders ruled Hans Wyker out of a membership among them. Moreover, they declared their intentions of forever beating back all efforts at saloon building within the corporation's limits, making Wykerton their sworn enemy for all time. In the new town, which was a ten-by-ten shack of vertical boards, a sod stable, and two dugout homes, the very first sale of lots, for cash, too, was made to Darley Champers & Co., dealers in real estate, mortgages, loans, etc.

One summer Sabbath afternoon, three years after the grasshopper raid of dreadful memory, Asher came again to the little grave in the Grass River graveyard where other graves were consecrating the valley in other hearts. This time he bore in his arms a dimpled, brown-eyed baby boy who cooed and smiled as only babies can and flung his little square fists aimlessly about in baby joy of living.

"We'll wait here, Thaine, till your mother comes from Bennington's to tell us about the little baby that just came to our settlement only two days ago and staked out a claim in a lot of hearts."

Little Thaine had found that his fist and his mouth

belonged together, so he offered no comment. Asher sat down on the warm sod with the baby on his knees.

"This is your little sister's grave, Thaine. She staid with us less than a day, but we loved her then and we love her still. Her name was to have been Mercy Pennington Aydelot, after the sweet Quaker girl your two great-great-grandfathers both loved. Such a big name for such a tiny girl! She isn't here, Thaine. This is just the little sod house she holds as her claim. She is in a beautiful mansion now. But she binds us always to the Grass River Valley because she has a claim here. We couldn't bear to go away and leave her little holding. And now you've come and all the big piece of prairie soil that is your papa's and mamma's now will be yours some day. I hope you'll want to stay here."

A stab of pain thrust him deeply as he remembered his own father and understood for the first time what Francis Aydelot must have felt for him. And then he remembered his mother's sacrifice and breadth of view.

"Oh, Thaine, will you want to leave us some day?" he said softly, gazing down into the baby's big dark eyes. "Heaven give me breadth and courage and memory, too," he added, "when that time comes not to be unkind; but to be brave to let you go. Only, Thaine, there's no bigger place to go than to a big, fine Kansas farm. Oh! we fathers are all alike. What Clover Creek was to Francis Aydelot, Grass River is to me. Will it be given to you to see bigger things?"

Thaine Aydelot crowed and stretched his little legs and threw out his hands.

"Thaine, there are no bigger things than the gifts of

the soil. I may only win it, but you can find its hundredfold of increase. See, yonder comes your mother. Not the pretty, dainty Virginia girl I brought here as my bride. But I tell you truly, baby boy, she will always be handsome, because — you wouldn't understand if I told you, but you will some day."

"Oh, Asher, the new baby is splendid, and Mrs. Bennington is ever so well," Virginia said, coming up to where he sat waiting for her. "They call her Josephine after Mr. Bennington's mother. Thaine will never be lonely here, as we have been. After all, it is not the little graves alone that anchor us anywhere, for we can take memory with us wherever we go; it is the children living, as well, that hold our hearthstones fast and build a real community, even in a wilderness. We are just ready to begin now. The real story of the prairie is the story of the second generation. The real romance out here will be Thaine Aydelot's romance, for he was born here."

CHAPTER IX

The Beginning of Service

Amid all the din
Of the everyday battle some peace may begin,
Like the silence of God in its regal content,
Till we learn what the lesson of yesterday meant.

HANS WYKER had managed skillfully when he pulled the prospective county seat of Wolf county up Big Wolf Creek to Wykerton, a town he hoped to build after his own ideals. And his ideals had only one symbol, namely, the dollar sign. Hans had congratulated himself not a little over his success.

"I done it all mineself," he was wont to boast. "So long as Doc Carey tink he own der town vots name for him, an' so long as Yon Yacob, der ding-busted little Chew, tink him an' Todd Stewart run all der pusiness mitout regardin' my saloon pusiness, an' so long as Pryor Gaines preachin' an' teachin' all time gifin' black eye to me, 'cause I sells wisky, I not mak no hetway."

"You are danged right," Darley Champers would always assure him.

"Yah, I be. But von day I pull a lot of strinks at vonce. I pull der county seat locate to Pig Wolf Creek, an' I put up mine prewery here mit water power here vot dey vassent not at Carey's Crossing. An' der railroat comin' by dis way soon, I know. I do big business two times in vonce. I laugh yet to tink how easy Yon Yacob fall down. If Yon Yacob say so he hold Carey's for der county seat.

But no. He yust sit shut oop like ant neffer say von sinkle vord. An' here she coom—my prewery, my saloon, my county seat, an' all in vonce."

Hans would laugh till the tears ran down his rough red cheeks. Then blowing his nose like a blast against the walls of Jericho he would add:

"Yon Yacob go back to Cincinnati. Doc Carey, he come Vest an' locate again right here. Course he tak up claim on nort fork of Grass River. But dat's yust for speculation some yet. Gaines an' Stewart go to Grass River settlement an' homestead. Oh, I scatter 'em like chaffs. Ho! Ho!" And again the laughter would bring tears to his watery little white-gray eyes.

What Hans Wyker said of John Jacobs was true, for in the council that decided the fate of the town it was his silence that lost the day and put Carey's Crossing off the map. Hans, while rejoicing over the result, openly accused Jacobs of being a ding-busted, selfish Jew who cared for nobody but John Jacobs. Secretly Hans admired Jacobs for his business ability, and all men respected him for a gentleman. Hence it was no small disappointment to the brewery owner to find when Jacobs returned to Kansas that he did not mean to open a business in Wykerton. Instead, he loaned his money to Grass River homesteaders.

When crops began to bring returns Jacobs established a new town farther west on the claim that Dr. Carey had taken up. Jacobs insisted on calling the place Careyville in honor of the doctor, because he had been the means of annihilating the first town named after Carey. And since he had befriended the settlers in the days after the grasshopper raid he drew all the trade west of Big Wolf to

this new town, cutting deep into the Wykerton business. Misfortunes hunt in couples when they do not gather in larger companies. Not only did the Jacobs store decrease the income of the Wykerton stores, but, following hard after, came the shifting of county lines. Wolf county fell into three sections, to increase three other counties. The least desirable ground lay in the north section, and the town built up on a brewery and the hopes of being hit by a railroad survey, and of holding the county seat, was left in this third part which, like Caesar's third part of all Gaul, was most barbarous because least often the refining influences of civilization found their way thither.

Then came the crushing calamity, the Prohibitory Law, which put Hans Wyker out of business. And hand in hand with this disaster, when the railroad came at last it drove its steel lines imperiously westward, ignoring Wykerton, with the ugly little canyons of Big Wolf on the north, and the site of Carey's Crossing beside the old blossom-bordered trail on the south. Finding the new town of Careyville a strategic point, it headed straight thither, built through it, marked it for a future division point, and forged onward toward the sunset.

Dr. Carey had located an office on his claim when there were only four other buildings on the Careyville townsite. Darley Champers opened a branch office there about the same time, although he did not leave Wykerton. But the downfall of Wyker and his interests cut deeper into the interests of the Grass River settlement than anyone dreamed of at the time. It sifted into Wyker's slow brain that the Jew, as he called Jacobs with many profane decorations, had been shrewd as well as selfish when his silent vote had

given Wykerton the lead in the race for a county seat location.

"Infernal scoundrel," Hans would cry with many gestures, "he figger it out in his own little black het and neffer tell nobody, so. He know to hisself dat Carey's Crossing's too fur sout, so — an' Big Wolf Creek too fur nort, so." Hands wide apart, and eyes red with anger. "He know der survey go between like it, so! And he figger it hit yust fer it hit Grass River, nort fork. An' he make a townsite dere, yust where Doc Carey take oop. Devil take him! An' he pull all my town's trade mit his fat pocketbook, huh! I send Champers to puy all Grass River claims. Dey don't sell none. I say, 'Champers, let 'em starf.' Den Champers, he let 'em. When supplies for crasshopper sufferers cooms from East we lock 'em oop in der office, tight. An' ve sell 'em. Huh! Cooms Yon Yacob an' he loan claimholters money — fife per cent, huh! Puy 'em, hide an' hoof, an' horn, an' tail! Dey all swear py Yon Yacob. He rop me. I fix him yet sometime. I hate Yon Yacob!"

And Hans Wyker's hate was slow, but it was incurably poison.

One morning in early autumn Dr. Horace Carey drove leisurely down the street of the town that bore his name. The air was crisp and invigorating, for the September heat had just been broken by copious showers. Todd Stewart stood in the doorway of Jacobs' store, watching the doctor's approach.

"Good morning, Doctor," he called. "Somebody dying or a highwayman chasing after you for your pocketbook, that you drive so furiously?"

"Good morning, Stewart. No, nobody is in danger.

Can't a doctor enjoy life once in a while? The country's so disgustingly healthy I have to make the best of it and kill time some way. Come, help at the killing, won't you?" Carey drew rein before the door of the store.

"I can't do it, Carey. Jacobs is away up on Big Wolf appraising some land and I want to be here when he comes in. I must do some holding up myself pretty soon if things don't pick up after this hot summer."

"You're an asset to the community, to be growling like that with this year's crops fairly choking the market," Horace Carey declared.

With a good-by wave of his hand he turned his horses' heads toward the south and took his way past the grain elevator toward the railroad crossing. The morning train was just pulling up to the station, blocking the street, so Carey sat still watching it with that interest a great locomotive in motion always holds for thinking people.

"Papa, there's Doctor Carey," a child's voice cried, and Thaine Aydelot bounded across the platform toward him, followed by his less-excited father.

Thaine was a sturdy, sun-browned little fellow of seven years, with blooming cheeks and big dark eyes. He was rather under than over normal size, and in the simplicity of plains life he had still the innocence of the very little boy.

"Good morning, Thaine. Good morning, Aydelot. Are you just getting home? Let me take you out. I'm going your way myself," Dr. Carey said.

"Good morning. Yes, we are getting home a little earlier than we were expected and nobody is here to meet us. We'll be glad to ride out with you."

Asher lifted Thaine into the buggy with the words. A

certain reserve between the two men had never been broken, although they respected each other deeply and were fast friends.

The train cleared the crossing and the three went south over the bridge across the dry North Fork Creek, beyond the cattle pens, and on to the open country leading out toward the Grass River Valley. The morning was glorious with silvery mists lifting along the river's course and a shimmering light above golden stubble and brown plowed land and level prairie; while far away, in all its beauty, hung the deep purple veil that Nature drops between her finite and her infinite, where the things that are seen melt into the things that are not seen.

"Take the lines, Aydelot, and let me visit with Thaine," Horace Carey said, giving Asher the reins.

He was fond of children and children were more than fond of him. Thaine idolized him and snuggled up in his lap now with complete contentment of soul.

"Tell me all about it now, Thaine. Where have you been so long? I might have missed you down on the Sunflower Ranch this morning if I had driven faster and headed off the through train as it came in."

"Oo-o!" Thaine groaned at the possible disaster to himself. "We've been to Topeka, a very long way off."

"And you saw so many fine things?" Carey questioned.

"Yes, a big, awful big river. And a bridge made of iron. And it just rattled when we went across. And there were big pieces of the Statehouse lying around in the tall weeds. And such greeny green grass just *everywhere.* And, and, oh, the biggest trees. So many, all close together. Papa said it was like Ohio. Oh, so big. I

never knew trees could grow so big, nor so many of them all together."

Little Thaine spread his short arms to show how wondrous large these trees were.

"He has never seen a tree before that was more than three inches through, except two or three lonesome cottonwoods. The forests of his grandfather's farm in Ohio would be gigantic to him. How little the prairie children know of the world!" Asher declared.

Dr. Carey remembered what Jim Shirley had told him of that lost estate in Ohio, and refrained from comment.

"You'd like to live in Topeka where the big Kaw river is, and the big trees along its banks, and so much green grass, wouldn't you, Thaine?"

"No!" The child's face was quaintly contemptuous. "It's too — too choky." The little hand clutched at the fat brown throat. "And the grass is so mussy green, and you can't *see* to *any*where for the bumpy hills and things. I like our old brown prairies best. It's so — nice out here." And with a sigh of perfect satisfaction Thaine leaned against Dr. Carey's shoulder and gazed out at the wide landscape swathed in the early morning sunlight.

The two men exchanged glances.

"This will be the land of memory for him some day, as you look back to the mountains of Virginia and I to the woodlands of Ohio," Asher said.

"It is worth remembering, anyhow," Carey replied. "I can count twenty young wind-breaks from the swell just ahead, and the groves are springing up on many ranches from year to year. Your grove is the finest in the valley now, Aydelot."

"It is doing well," Asher said. "Mrs. Aydelot and I planned our home-to-be on the first evening we came to the Sunflower Inn. It was a sort of mirage-of-the-desert picture, it is true, but we were like the tapestry weavers. We hung the pattern up before our eyes and worked to it. It is slow weaving, I'll admit, but we kept on because we wanted to at first, then because we had to, and finally because our hearts took root in a baby's grave. They say the tapestry makers work on the wrong side of the threads, but when their work is done the pattern comes out complete. I hope ours will too. But there's many a day of aching muscles, and many a day of disappointment along the way. Crops prosper and crops fail, but we can't let the soil go untilled."

"I think we are all tapestry weavers. The trouble is sometimes in the pattern we hang up before us and sometimes in the careless weaving," Dr. Carey added.

They rode a while in silence. The doctor's cheek was against Thaine's dark hair and Asher looked down at his hard brown hands and then away at the autumn prairie.

Fifteen years on a plains claim, with all the daily grind of sowing and reaping and care of stock and garden, had not taken quite all the military bearing from him. He was thirty-eight years old now, vigorous and wholesome and hopeful. The tanning Kansas sunshine had not hidden the old expression of patience and endurance, nor had the sight of many hardships driven the vision from the clear, far-seeing gray eyes.

"Look at the sunflowers, Papa," Thaine cried as a curve of the trail brought a long golden line to view.

"You like the sunflowers, don't you?" Carey asked.

"Oh, yes, better than all the flowers on the prairie. My mamma loves them, too, because they made her think once papa wasn't dead."

"Thaine, what do you mean to do when you grow up?" Horace Carey interrupted the child.

"I'm going to be a soldier like my papa was," Thaine declared decisively.

"But there will probably be no wars. You see, your papa and I fought the battles all through and settled things. Maybe you can't go to war," Dr. Carey suggested.

"Oh, yes, I can. There'll be another war by that time, and I'm going, too. And when I come back I'm going away to where the purple notches are and have a big ranch and do just like my papa," Thaine asserted.

"Where are the purple notches?" the doctor asked.

"See yonder, away, way off?"

Thaine pointed toward the misty southwest horizon where three darker curves were outlined against a background of pale purple blending through lilac up to silvery gray.

"I'm going there some day," the boy insisted.

"And leave your papa and mamma?"

"They left their papas and mammas, too," Thaine philosophized.

The men laughed, although each felt a curious deep pain at the boy's words.

Thaine settled back, satisfied to be silent as he watched the wonderful prairie landscape about him.

"I am going down to Shirley's," Carey began, as if to change the subject. "Strange fellow, Jim; I never knew another like him."

"I was just thinking of Shirley," Asher responded. "He is a royal neighbor and true friend, better to everybody else than he is to himself. His own crops suffer sometimes while he helps other folks lay theirs by. And yet his premises always look like he was expecting company. One cannot help wondering what purpose stays him in his work."

"There is the tragedy of it," Horace Carey declared. "I never knew a more affectionate man, yet he has lived a bachelor all these years."

"How long have you known him, Carey?" Asher asked.

"Since the night at Kelley's Ferry, back in the Civil War. Our regiment, the Fifty-fourth Virginia, was taken. We were worn out with fighting and marching, and we were nearly starved besides. The Third Ohio boys had been in the same fix once and our boys—"

"Yes, I was a Third Ohio boy. I know what you fellows did. You saved our lives," Asher broke in.

"Well, you paid us back at Kelley's Ferry. I first knew Jim Shirley that night, although he remembered me from the time we had your regiment at our mercy. He brought me bacon and hard tack and coffee. We have been friends ever since. How long have you known him?"

"I am going to war when I get big, before I ever go to the purple notches. I know I am."

Thaine had been listening intently and now he broke in with face aglow and eyes full of eagerness.

"God forbid!" Carey said. "The lure of the drum beat might be hard for older men to resist even now."

"Your hand will fit a plow handle better than a gun-stock, Thaine," his father assured him, looking down at

the boy's square, sun-browned hand with a dimple in each knuckle.

Thaine shut his lips tightly and said no more. But his father, who knew the heart of a boy, wondered what thoughts might lie back of that silence.

"I have known Jim all my life," Asher Aydelot took up the conversation where Thaine had interrupted it. "That is why I have wondered at the tenacity of his holding on out here. A man of his temperament is prone to let go quickly. Besides, Jim is far from being a strong man physically."

"When he was down with pneumonia in the early seventies he was ready to give up. Didn't want to get well and was bound not to do it," Dr. Carey said, "but somehow a letter I had brought him seemed to change him with one reading. 'I will do anything to get back to strength and work,' he declared, and he has worked ever since like a man who knew his business, even if his business judgment is sometimes faulty."

They rode awhile in silence, drinking in the delicious air of early autumn. Presently Dr. Carey said:

"Aydelot, I am taking a letter down to Jim this morning. It is in the same handwriting as the one I took when he had the pneumonia so severely. I learned a little something of Jim's affairs through friends when I was East studying some years ago."

He paused for a moment. Then, as if to change the subject, he continued:

"By the way, there was a bank failure at Cloverdale once that interested you. Did you ever investigate it?"

"There was nothing to investigate," Asher replied.

It did not occur to him to connect the query with Carey's knowledge of Shirley's affairs or with his studying in the East.

"You have relatives there?" Carey asked.

"Yes, a Jane Aydelot. Married, single, widowed, I can't tell. My father left his estate to her. I was in love with the West then, and madly in love with my wife. My father wasn't impressed with either one. But, you see, I was rash about little things like money matters. I had so much faith in myself and I couldn't give up a girl like Virginia Thaine. Understand, I have no quarrel with Jane Aydelot. Her property is absolutely her own, not mine to crave and look forward to getting some day."

"I understand," Horace Carey said, looking out toward the purple notches now more clearly outlined against the sky. "How this country has changed since that cold day when Mrs. Aydelot came almost to the old Crossing after me. The sand dunes narrow and the river deepens a little every year. The towns come and go on the prairies, but the homesteaders build better. It is the farmer who really makes a new country habitable."

"That's what my mother said when I talked of coming West. But the real test will come with the second generation. If it is loyal we will have won. Here is the old Grass River trail that Jim and I followed many lonely days. The valley is slowly coming out of the wilderness," Asher replied, remembering his wife's words long before when she said: "The real story of the plains is the story of the second generation. The real romance out here will be Thaine Aydelot's romance."

They had reached the old trail that led to the Grass River

settlement now. It was still a new country where few trees, save some lone cottonwoods, were as tall as a cabin, and nothing broke the view. But groves had rooted, low windbreaks cut the country at frequent intervals; many acres of sod had been turned by the plow, and many more were being shut in by fences where the open cattle range was preempted by freeholds. One bit of woodland, however, was beginning to dignify the valley. The Aydelot grove spread over a hundred acres before the one-time sod Sunflower Inn. The new home was on the swell now as Virginia had seen the Colonial mansion of the mirage on the day she went seeking aid for the grasshopper-beset neighborhood. But this was just a little cottage waiting, like the grove, for years of time in which to grow a mansion shaded with tall trees, with the lake and the woodland before it, and the open prairie beyond.

Down at Jim Shirley's ranch the changes were many, for Jim had an artist's eye. And the energy other settlers spent on the needs of wives and children Jim spent on making his little dwelling attractive. He had brought clover seed from Ohio, and had carefully sowed a fire guard around his sod shack. Year by year the clover business increased; fire guard grew to clover-lot, and clover-lot to little meadow. Then the little meadow expanded along Grass River to a small cattle range. Over the door of his four-roomed cottage he put the name "Cloverdale," as he had put it over his sod cabin years before. And the Cloverdale Ranch, like the Sunflower Ranch farther up the river, became a landmark on the trail.

Pryor Gaines, still the teacher-preacher of the Grass River settlement, had come to the Cloverdale Ranch on an

errand, and he and Jim Shirley were chatting beside the well curb when Dr. Carey drove up.

"Hello, Carey. How did you scent chicken pie so far? And a plum pudding all brown and ready?" Shirley called hospitably.

"It's my business to find what produces sickness as well as to provide cures," Carey responded as he stepped from his buggy to tie his horses.

"Take him in the house, Pryor, while I stable his crowbaits," Jim said, patting one of the doctor's well groomed horses the while.

"I hope you will stay, too," Horace Carey said to Pryor Gaines. "I have some important news for Shirley, and you and he are fast friends."

"The bachelor twins of Grass River," Pryor Gaines declared. "Jim hasn't any lungs and I haven't any heart, so we manage to keep a half a household apiece, and added together make one fairly reputable citizen. I'll stay if Jim wishes me to, of course."

"The two most useful men in the community," Carey declared. "Jim has been father and mother, big brother, and hired girl for half the settlement, while you, you marry and train up and bury. No neighborhood is complete without a couple of well-meaning old bachelors."

"How about a bachelor M. D.?" Pryor Gaines asked. "I've not been able to get in my work on you yet."

"Purely a necessary evil, the M. D. business," Carey insisted. "Here's Jim now. We wait the chicken and plum pudding, Host Shirley."

Jim's skill as a cook had not decreased since the day when he prepared Asher Aydelot's wedding supper, and

the three men who sat together at that day's meal took large enjoyment in this quiet hour together.

"I have a letter for you, Shirley," the doctor said at last. "It was sent to me some months ago with the request that I give it to you when I had word to do so. I have had word. Here it is."

"I think I'll be going now." Pryor Gaines rose with the words.

"Don't go," Jim insisted. "I want you here."

So Gaines sat down. Shirley, who was quick in intuitive power, knew instinctively what awaited him. He opened the letter and read it while the two friends busied themselves with a consideration of Jim's bookcase, reading-table, and toolchest combined, all made out of one goods box with sundry trimmings.

Jim said nothing when he had finished, grateful that no painful silence on the part of the other two men forced him to words until he was ready to speak.

"Listen to me," he said at length. "I need your help now. When I came West life didn't seem worth living at first, but I had it on my hands and couldn't throw it away. I tried to take an interest in Asher Aydelot's home. But it is a second-rate kind of pleasure to sit by your own lonely fireside and enjoy the thought of the comfort another man has in his home with the wife of his choice."

A shadow fell on Dr. Carey's face as he sat looking through the open window at the stretch of green clover down the valley.

"I was about ready to call time on myself one winter here when Carey brought me a letter. It was from Alice Leigh, my brother Tank's wife. Tank and I were related

—by marriage. We had the same father, but not the same mother. My mother died the day I was born. Nobody else is so helpless as a man with a one-day-old baby. My father was fairly forced into a second marriage by my step-mother, Betsy Tank. She was the housekeeper at the tavern after my mother's death. Her god was property and Tank is just like her. She married the old Shirley House. It looked big to her. Oh, well! I needn't repeat a common family history. I never had a mother, nor a wife, nor a sister, nor a brother. Even my father was early prejudiced in Tank's interest against mine, always. The one happy memory of my boyhood years was the loving interest of Asher Aydelot's mother, who made the old Aydelot farmhouse on the National road a welcome spot to me. For the Lord made me with a foolish longing for a home and all of these things—father, mother, sister, and brother."

"So you have been father and mother, brother and sister to this whole settlement," Pryor Gaines said.

"Which may be vastly satisfying to these relatives, but does not always fill the lack in one's own life," Horace Carey added, as a man who might know whereof he spoke.

"I won't bore you with details," Jim began again. "The letter I had from Alice Leigh, Tank's wife, a dozen or more years ago, asked me if I would take the guardianship of her children if they should need a guardian. I knew they would need one, if she were—taken from earth, as she had reason to fear then that she might be soon. I began to live with a new motive—a sense that I was needed, a purpose to be ready to help her children—the one service I could give to her. There's a long, cruel story back of her marriage to Tank—a story of deception,

coercion, love of money, and all the elements of common cussedness — too common to make a good story. And, as generally happens, when Tank married the girl who didn't want him he treated her as he's always treated everybody else."

Jim clinched his fists hard and shut his teeth with a grip as he sat silent for a moment. Then drawing a deep breath, as if he were lifting a weight from his life, he said calmly:

"Mrs. Shirley died some time ago. Only one child survived her — a little girl six years old. The letter says — " The letter fluttered in Jim's trembling hands. "It says, 'My little Leigh is just six. She has been taught to love her uncle Jim. . . . Through the help of a friend here' — she doesn't give the name — 'I have made you her guardian. I want her to go to your home. Her father will not take any responsibility, nor try to keep her. I know you will not fail me.'"

Jim folded the letter abruptly. "It is a dead woman's last wish. How can I make a home for a little girl? What shall I do?"

He looked at the two men for answer. The doctor lifted his hand to Pryor Gaines, but the preacher waited awhile before replying. Then he said thoughtfully:

"It is easy for us two to vote a duty on you, Shirley. I answer only because you ask, not because I would advise. From my angle of vision, this looks like your call to service. Your lonely fireside is waiting for a little child's presence — the child already taught to love you. I would say send for her at once."

"But how can I send?" Jim questioned. "How can

I do a parent's part by her? I can help a neighbor in need. I can't bring up his children. I'm not fit for that kind of work. I've hung on here for more than a dozen years to be ready to help when the time came, and now the thing seems impossible."

"'As thy day, so shall thy strength be.' If you have prepared yourself to do anything, you can do it," Pryor Gaines assured him.

"Well, how can I send?" Jim asked again. "There's nobody there to bring her, and nobody here to go after her. It's an awfully long way from here to Ohio. A little six-year-old girl can't come alone. I couldn't go back myself. I may be a coward, but the Almighty made me as I am. I can't go back to Cloverdale and see only a grave —I can stay here and remember, and maybe do a kind of a man's part, but I can't go back." He bowed his head and sat very still.

"You are right, Shirley," Pryor Gaines spoke softly still. "Unless you were close to the life in its last days, don't hang any graves like dead weights of ineffectual sorrow about your neck. Look back to the best memories. Look up to the eternal joy no grave can withhold."

There was a sympathetic chord in Pryor Gaines' voice that spoke home to the heart, and so long as he lived in the Grass River valley, he gave the last service for everyone who left it for the larger life beyond it.

"I will go for you, Shirley," Horace Carey said. "You forget who brought you this letter. That it was sent to me for you, and that the time to give it to you was left until I was notified. This friend of your brother's wife is a friend of mine. Let me go."

"Horace Carey, since the night your Virginia regiment fed us poor starving fellows in the old war times, you've been true blue."

"Well, I wore the gray that night, and I'd probably do it again. I can't tell. It was worth wearing, if only for men to find out how much bigger manhood and brotherhood are than any issue of war to be satisfied only by shedding of innocent blood," Horace Carey replied, glad to lift the burden of thought from Shirley's mind.

"Could a sectional war ever have begun out here on these broad prairies, where men need each other so?" Pryor Gaines asked, following the doctor's lead.

"Something remarkably like it did make a stir out here once. Like it, only worse," Horace Carey answered with a smile. "But the little girl, what's her name? Leigh? We'll have her here for you. Your service is only beginning, but think of the comfort of such a service. I envy you, Jim."

"A little child shall lead them," Pryor Gaines added reverently.

Then they fell to talking of the coming of little Leigh Shirley. The hours of the day slipped by. The breeze came pouring over the prairie from the far southwest where the purple notches stood sentinel. The warm afternoon sunlight streamed in at the door. The while these childless men planned together for the welfare of one motherless, and worse than fatherless, little girl away in the Clover Creek Valley in Ohio, waiting for a home and guardianship and love under far Kansas skies.

CHAPTER X

The Coming of Love

I love the world with all its brave endeavor,
  I love its winds and floods, its suns and sands,
But, oh, I love most deeply and forever
  The clinging touch of timid little hands.

THE Ohio woods were gorgeous with the October coloring. The oak in regal purple stood outlined against the beech in cloth-of-gold, while green-flecked hickory and elm, and iridescent silver and scarlet ash, and flaming maple added to the kaleidoscope of splendor.

The old National pike road leading down to Cloverdale was still flanked by little rail-fenced fields that were bordered by deep woodlands. The old Aydelot farmhouse was as neat and white, with gardens and flower beds as well kept, as if only a day had passed since the master and mistress thereof had gone out to their last earthly home in the Cloverdale graveyard.

Fifteen years had seen the frontier pushed westward with magic swiftness. The Grass River Valley, once a wide reach of emptiness and solitude, where only one homestead stood a lone bulwark against the forces of the wilderness, now, after a decade and a half, beheld its prairie dotted with freeholds, where the foundations of homes were laid.

Fifteen years marked little appreciable change in the heritage given up by Asher Aydelot out of his love for a girl and his dream of a larger opportunity in the new

West. For fifteen springtimes the old-fashioned sweet pinks had blossomed on the two mounds where his last service had been given to his native estate. Hardly a tree had been cut in the Aydelot woods. The marshes in the lower ground had not been drained. The only change in the landscape was the high grade of the railroad that cut a triangle from the northwest corner of the farm in its haste to reach Cloverdale and be done with it. The census of 1880, however, showed an increase in ten years of seventy-five citizens in Clover County, and the community felt satisfied with itself.

The afternoon train on the Cloverdale branch was late getting into town, but the station parasites were rewarded for their patience by the sight of a stranger following the usual two or three passengers who alighted. Strangers were not so common in Cloverdale that anyone's face would be forgotten under ten years of time.

"That's that same feller that come here ten year or mebby twelve year ago. I'd know him in Guinea," one of the oldest station parasites declared.

"That's him, sure as shootin'," his comrade-in-laziness agreed. "A doctor, don't you ricolleck? Name's Corrie, no, Craney, no, that's not it neither — A-ah!" trying hard to think a little.

"Carey. Don't you remember?" the first speaker broke in, "Doc Carey. They say he doctored Miss Jane in Philadelphia, an' got in good with her, more'n a dozen years ago."

"Well," drawled the second watcher of affairs, "if he thinks he can get anything out'n o' her by hangin' round Cloverdale, he's barkin' up the wrong saplin'. Miss Jane,

she's close, an' too set in her ways now. She must be nigh forty."

"That's right. But, I'll bet he's goin' there now. Let's see."

The two moved to the end of the station, from which strategic point both the main street, the National pike road, of course, and the new street running "cat-i-cornered" from the station to the creek bridge could be commanded.

"Darned fool! is what he is! hikin' straight as a plumbline fur the crick. If he was worth it, I'd foller him."

"Oh, the ornery pup will be back all right. Lazy fellers waitin' to marry rich old maids ain't worth follerin'. Darn 'em! Slick skeezicks, tryin' to git rich jes' doin' nothin'."

So the two citizens agreed while they consigned a perfect stranger to a mild purgatory. His brisk wholesomeness offended them, and the narrowness of their own daily lives bred prejudice as the marshes breed mosquitoes.

Dr. Carey walked away with springing step. He was glad to be at his journey's end; glad to be off the slow little train, and glad to see again the October woods of the Alleghany foothills. To the eastern-bred man, nothing in the grandeur of the prairie landscape can quite meet the craving for the autumn beauty of the eastern forests. The slanting rays of the late afternoon sun fell athwart the radiant foliage of the woods as Dr. Carey's way led him between the two lines of flaming glory. When he had cleared the creek valley, his pace slackened. Something of the old boyhood joy of living, something of the sorrowful-sweet memory, the tender grace of a day that is dead,

but will never be forgotten, came with the pensive autumn mood of Nature to make the day sweet to the pensive mind.

Jane Aydelot sat on the veranda of the Aydelot home, looking eagerly toward Cloverdale, when she discovered Dr. Carey coming leisurely up the road. She was nearly forty years old, as the railroad station loafers had declared, but there was nothing about her to indicate the "old maid, set in her ways." She might have passed for Asher's sister, for she had a certain erect bearing and strong resemblance of feature. All single women were called old maids at twenty-five in those days. Else this fair-faced woman with clear gray eyes and pink cheeks, and scarce a hint of white in her abundant brown hair, would not have been considered in the then ridiculed class. There was a mixture of resoluteness and of timidity in the expression of her face betokening a character at once determined of will but shrinking in action. And withal, she was daintily neat and well kept, like her neat and well-kept farm and home.

As Dr. Carey passed up the flower-bordered walk, she arose to greet him. If there was a look of glad expectancy in her eyes, the doctor did not notice it, for the whole setting of the scene was peacefully lovely, and the fresh-cheeked, white-handed woman was a joy to see. Some quick remembrance of the brown-handed claimholders' wives crossed his mind at that instant, and like a cruel stab to his memory came unbidden the picture of Virginia Thaine in her dainty girlishness in the old mansion house of the years now dead. Was he to blame that the contrast between Asher Aydelot's wife, now of Kansas, and Jane Aydelot of Ohio should throw the favor toward the latter, that he

should forget for the moment what the women of the frontier must sacrifice in the winning of the wilderness?

"I am glad to see you again, Doctor," Jane Aydelot said in cordial greeting.

"This is a very great pleasure to me, I assure you, Miss Aydelot," Horace Carey replied, grasping her hand.

Inside the house everything was as well appointed as the outside suggested. As the doctor was making himself more presentable after his long journey, he realized that the pretty, old-fashioned bedroom had evidently been a boy's room once, Asher Aydelot's room. And with a woman's loving sentiment, neither Asher's mother nor the present owner had changed it at all. The petals of a pink rose of the wallpaper by the old-styled dresser were written over in a boyish hand and the doctor read the names of "Jim and Alice," and "Asher and Nell."

"Old sweethearts of 'the Kerry Dancing' days," he thought to himself.

From the open window he looked out upon the magnificence of the autumn forests and saw the white pike road leading down to Clover Creek and the church spires and courthouse tower above the trees.

"The heir to all this comfort and beauty gave it up because he didn't want to be a tavern-keeper here, and because he did want a girl—Virginia!" Horace Carey said the name softly. "I know what her jessamine-draped window looked out upon. I hardly realized when I was here before what Asher's early home had been. Yet those two for love of each other are building their lives into the life of their chosen State. It is the tiller of the soil who must make the West. But how many times in the lonely days

in that little sod cabin must they have remembered their childhood homes! How many times when the hot fall winds swept across the dead brown prairie have their memories turned to the beauty of the October days here in the East! Oh, well, the heroes weren't all killed at Lexington and Bunker Hill, nor at Bull Run and Gettysburg. Some of them got away, and with heroic wives went out to conquer the plains from the harsh rule of Nature there."

When the doctor went downstairs again, a little girl met him, saying, "Miss Jane says you may sit in the parlor, or out on the meranda, till supper is ready."

"How pleasant! Won't you come and sit with me?" Doctor Carey replied.

"I must put the — the lap-robes on the tables to everybody's plate, and the knives and forks and poons. Nen I'll come," she answered.

Carey sat on the veranda enjoying the minutes and waiting for the little girl.

"What is your name?" he asked when she appeared, and climbed into Miss Jane's vacant chair.

"Leigh Shirley. What's yours?"

"Horace Carey."

The doctor could not keep from smiling as he looked at her. She was so little and pretty, with yellow hair, big blue eyes, china-doll cheeks, and with all the repose of manner that only childhood and innocence can bestow.

"I think I like you, Horace," Leigh said frankly, after carefully looking Carey over.

"Then, we'll be friends," he declared.

"Not for so mery long." Leigh could not master the V of the alphabet yet. "'Cause I'm going away pretty

soon, Miss Jane say. You know my mamma's dead." The little face was very grave now. "And my Uncle Jim out in Kansas wants me. I'm going to him."

Even in her innocence, Doctor Carey noted the very definite tone and clear trend of the young mind.

"Miss Jane loves me and I love her," Leigh explained further. "Don't you love Miss Jane, Horace?"

"Certainly," Carey said, with some hesitancy.

"I'll tell her so. She will love you, too. She is mery sweet," Leigh assured him. "Where are you going to?"

"I'm going back to Kansas soon."

"Wim me?"

"I should like to. Let's go together."

Leigh slid quickly from the chair and ran inside, where Doctor Carey heard her clear childish voice saying, "He is going to Kansas, too, Miss Jane. He says he loves you. His name is Horace, and he's mery nice. He's not mery pretty, though, but you love him, too, don't you, Miss Jane?"

Evidently the child was close to Miss Jane, for the doctor heard something like a kiss and low words that seemed to send her away on some errand. Presently he caught sight of a sunny head and two big blue eyes and a little hand beckoning to him, as Leigh peeped around the corner of the house.

"Miss Jane says I mustn't talk too much and mustn't call you Horace, but just Doctor Carey. Won't you come with me to get flowers for supper?"

The two strolled together into the old flower garden where verbenas and phlox and late asters and early chrysanthemums and a few monthly roses under Miss Jane's care-

ful covering had weathered the first frosts. Leigh knew each plant and shrub, and gave out information freely.

"Would you rather stay with Miss Jane?"

Doctor Carey knew he should not ask the question, but it came anyhow.

"Oh, no, I want to go to my Uncle Jim." Leigh settled the matter once for all.

That night Leigh fell asleep early, for Miss Jane was methodical with children. Then she and Doctor Carey sat until late by the open wood fire and talked of many things, but first of Leigh and her future.

"You will miss her, I'm sure," the doctor said.

"More than anyone will know," Miss Jane replied. "But I could not be happy without fulfilling my promise. I wrote you to come soon because each day makes the giving up a little harder for me. But I must know the truth about this Uncle Jim. I cannot send Leigh out of my house to be neglected and unloved. She demands love above all things."

The pink color deepened in Miss Jane's fair cheek as she recalled what Leigh had said to Doctor Carey about loving her. The doctor remembered also, and knew why she blushed. Yet blushes, he thought, were becoming to her.

"I'll tell you all I know of Mr. Shirley. We have been friends for many years," he said.

Then as truthfully as possible he told her of the life and mind of the lonely loving plainsman. When he had finished, Miss Jane sat awhile in silent thought.

"It is right that you should know something of conditions here, Doctor," she said at last. "The older Shir-

leys are dead. Tank's life hastened the end for them, the Cloverdale gossips say. And as I have owned the Shirley House for several years, I came to know them well, and I do not think the gossips were far out of the way."

"What of Tank's life?" Doctor Carey asked. "I have some personal reasons for asking."

Miss Jane looked up quickly. She was a pretty woman, and a keenly intelligent one as well. To Horace Carey, she seemed most charming at that moment.

"Let me tell you of Alice first," she said. "You know, of course, that she loved Jim. They were just suited to each other. But her mother and Tank's mother planned otherwise. Alice was submissive. Tank was greedy. He wanted the old Leigh farm. And envious, for he seemed to hate Jim always. It grew to be the passion of his life to want to take whatever Jim had. His mother hated Jim before he was born. It was his pre-natal heritage, combined with a selfish nature. There was misrepresentation and deception enough to make a plot for a novel; a misunderstanding and brief estrangement, separating Jim and Alice forever — all managed by Tank and his mother, for the farm first, and the downfall of Jim second. They took no account of Alice, who must be the greatest loser. And after they were married, both mothers-in-law were disappointed, for the Leigh farm was heavily incumbered and sold by the sheriff the same fall, and the Shirley House fell into Uncle Francis Aydelot's hands in about the same way. Love of property can be the root of much misery." Miss Jane paused, for the story brought bitterness to her kindly soul.

"It is ended now," Horace Carey said gently. "It is well that it is, I am sure."

"Yes, Alice rests now beside her two little ones who went before her. She had no sorrow in going, except for Leigh. And"—

"And you lifted that, I know." Doctor Carey finished the sentence.

"I tried to," Miss Jane said, struggling between timidity and truthfulness. "I made her last hours peaceful, for she knew Leigh would be cared for and safe. I saw to that. Tank Shirley is bound to a surrender of all legal claim to her. It was left to Jim to take her, if he chose. If not, she belongs to me. She is a strange child, wise beyond her years, with a sort of power already for not telling all she knows. You can rely on her in almost anything. She will make a strong woman some day."

Doctor Carey read the loving sacrifice back of the words, and his heart warmed toward this sweet-spirited, childless woman.

"Jim wants her, else I could not have come," he said gently, "but you can come to Grass River to see her sometimes."

"Oh, no, it is so far," Jane Aydelot said, and Carey realized in how small an orbit her life revolved.

"But she does good in it. What does distance count against that?" he thought to himself. Aloud he said:

"Tell me of Tank, Miss Aydelot."

"He has run his course here, but he is shrewd enough to escape the law. His parents mortgaged the Shirley House to get money to keep his doings quiet. My Uncle Francis foreclosed on them at last. But by Jim's abrupt leaving, Cloverdale blamed him for a long time for the family misfortunes. Tank broke every moral law; he invested his

money wildly in his greed to make more money, until finally the bank failure came. That is a long story, and it was a dead loss. But the cashier's suicide stopped investigation. All blame was laid on him. And he, being dead, made no complaint and incriminated nobody."

"Where is Tank now?" Carey asked.

He did not know why the image of Thomas Smith of Wilmington, Delaware, should come unbidden to his mind just now, nor why he should feel that the answer to his question held only a portion of what could have been told him then.

"Nobody knows exactly where," Jane Aydelot replied. "He left his wife penniless. She lived here with me and died here. Tank has n't been seen in Cloverdale for a long time. It is strange how family ties get warped sometimes. And oftenest over property."

Doctor Carey thought of Asher, and was silent. But Jane Aydelot divined his thought.

"I am thinking of our own family," she said, looking into the heart of the wood fire. "I have my cousin Asher's heritage, which by law now neither he nor any child of his can receive from me."

"Miss Aydelot, he doesn't want it. And there is no prejudice in him against you at all. Moreover, if his dreams come true, little Thaine Aydelot will never need it." There was a sternness in Carey's voice that pained his hostess.

"But, Doctor Carey!" she began hesitatingly. Then, as if to change the trend of thought, she added simply, "I try to use it well."

Horace Carey was by nature and experience a keen

reader of human minds. As Jane Aydelot studied the burning coals in the grate, he studied her face, and what he read there gave him both pleasure and pain. Between him and that face came the image of Virginia Aydelot, who should be there instead; of the brown-handed farmer's wife, who had given up so much for the West. And yet, that face, framed in its dark hair, lighted by luminous dark eyes, seemed to blot out the dainty pink and white Jane Aydelot. A strength of will, a view of life at wide angles of vision, a resourcefulness and power of sacrifice seemed to deify the plainly clad prairie home-maker, winning, not inheriting, her possessions. Had Jane been anywhere else save in the home that Virginia might have had, her future might have had another story. But why forecast the might-have-been?

"You do use your property well, I am sure," Doctor Carey said, replying to the last words spoken between them, "and yet, you would give it up?" He knew her answer, or he would not have asked the question.

For reply, she rose and went to the little writing desk where the Aydelot papers were kept. Taking therefrom two documents, she placed them in Carey's hands.

"Read these," she said, "then promise me that in the hour when Leigh needs my help you will let me help her."

They were the will of Francis Aydelot and her own will. How much of sacrifice lay in that act of hers, only Horace Carey could understand.

"I promise gladly, Miss Aydelot. I see why you are willing to give up little Leigh now," he said, looking up with eyes filled with sincerest admiration. "You are a won-

"Read these," she said, "then promise me that in the hour when Leigh needs my help you will let me help her"

derful woman. You have the same Aydelot heritage of endurance and patience and the large view of duty that characterizes your cousin Asher. Your setting is different. I hope the time may come soon when Ohio and Kansas will not be so far apart as they are tonight."

He rose and took her hand in his.

If Doctor Carey's magnetism made men admire him, it was no less an attractive force with women. As he looked into Jane Aydelot's gray eyes, he saw a new light there. And swiftly its meaning translated itself to him. He dropped her hand and turned away, and when their eyes met again, the light was gone.

It was still Indian-Summer weather on the prairie when Doctor Carey with little Leigh Shirley reached Careyville. He had a feeling that Jim would prefer meeting Leigh in his own home, so no word had been sent forward as to the time of the coming of the two.

All through the journey, the doctor had wondered how Jane Aydelot could have given Leigh up at all. She was such a happy prattler, such an honest, straightforward little body, such an innocent child, and, withal, so loving that Carey lost his own heart before the first half day was ended. In her little gray wool gown and her gray cap with its scarlet quill above her golden hair, she was as dainty and pretty as a picture of childhood could be.

Down on the Grass River trail, the two came upon Thaine Aydelot trudging in from some errand to a distant neighbor, and the doctor hailed him at once.

"Come, ride with us. We'll take you home," he said, turning the wheel for Thaine's convenience. "This is

Leigh Shirley, who is coming to live with her uncle, Jim. You'll like to go to the Cloverdale Ranch more than ever now."

Thaine was only a little country boy, unused to conventionalities, so he took Leigh on her face value at once. And Leigh, honest as she was innocent, returned the compliment. At the Sunflower Ranch, Carey drew rein to let Thaine leave them. Leigh, putting both arms about the little boy's neck, kissed him good-by, saying: "I have known you always because you are the Thaine"—she caught her breath, and added: "You must come to my uncle Jim's and see me."

"I will, I will," Thaine assured her.

Doctor Carey looked back to wave good-by just in time to see Virginia Aydelot coming toward Thaine, who stood watching the buggy. Instantly the pretty face of Jane Aydelot came to his mind, her face as she had looked on the night when they sat by the wood fire in the Aydelot farmhouse. Against that picture stood the reality of Virginia with her richer coloring.

"Nor storm nor stress can rob her of her beauty," he thought. "However sweet and self-sacrificing Jane Aydelot may be, the Plains would have broken her long ago."

He turned about at once and came back to where Thaine stood beside his mother.

"This is Jim Shirley's little girl, Mrs. Aydelot," he said, gently patting Leigh's shoulder.

"That's my wife," little Thaine said gravely. "We will go and live at the purple notches when I come home from the war."

Virginia's heart warmed toward the motherless little one,

and Leigh understood her at once. Nor once in all the years that followed did the two fail each other.

The Cloverdale homestead never had known such a gala fixing as Jim Shirley had kept there for nearly a week awaiting the doctor's return. Truly, love is genius in itself, and only genius could have put so many quaint and attractive touches to such common surroundings as now embellished the little four-roomed house in the bend of Grass River.

Doctor Carey tied his horses to the post beside the trail, and, lifting Leigh from the buggy, he said:

"Uncle Jim is up there waiting for you, and oh, so glad, so glad to have you come. Go and meet him, Leigh."

Leigh smoothed her little gray wool frock down with her dainty little hands. Then, pushing back the gray cap with its scarlet quill from her forehead where the golden hair fell in soft rings, she passed up the grassy way to meet Jim Shirley. He could never have looked bigger and handsomer than he did at that moment. In his eyes all the heart hunger of years seemed centered as he watched the little six-year-old child coming towards him.

Just before reaching the doorway, she paused, and with that clear penetration only a little child possesses, she looked up into the strong man's face.

"Uncle Jim. My Uncle Jim," she cried. "I can love you always."

Jim gathered her close in his arms, and she clung about his neck, softly patting his brown cheek as they passed into the house. While all unseen, the light of love went in with them, a light that should never fade from the hearthstone, driving loneliness and sorrow from it, far away.

Leigh Shirley's coming marked an epoch in the annals of the Grass River settlement, for her uncle often declared that he could remember only two events in the West before that time: the coming of Mrs. Aydelot and the grasshopper raid. With Leigh in his home, he almost forgot that he had ever been sad-hearted. This loving little child was such a constant source of interest and surprise. She was so innocently plain-spoken and self-dependent sometimes, and such a strange little dreamer of dreams at other times. She would drive a shrewd bargain for whatever she wanted — some more of Uncle Jim's good cookies, or a ride all alone on the biggest pony, or a two-days' visit at the Aydelot ranch, scrupulously rendering back value received of her own wares — kisses, or washing all the supper dishes for her tired uncle, or staying away from her play to watch that the chickens did not scratch in the garden.

But there were times when she would go alone to the bend in the river and people her world with folk of her own creation and live with them and for them. Chief among them all was a certain Prince Quippi, who would come from China some day to marry her and take her away to a house made of purple velvet and adorned with gold knobs. She had to send a letter to Prince Quippi every day or he would think she did not love him. Of course, she loved Uncle Jim best of what she called folks — but Prince Quippi was big and brown and handsome; and, strangely enough, the only kind of letter he could read from her was in a flower.

So Leigh dropped a flower on the waters of Grass River every day to float away to China telling her love to Prince Quippi. And oftenest it was the tawny sunflower, because it

was big and strong and could tell a big love story. Thus she dreamed her happy dreams until one day Thaine Aydelot, listening to her, said:

"Why my papa sent my mamma a sunflower once, and made her love him very much. I'll be your real Prince Quippi — not a — a paper-doll, thinkish one, and come after you."

"Clear from China?" Leigh queried.

"Yes, when I'm a big soldier like my papa, and we'll go off to the purple notches and live."

"You don't look like my Prince Quippi," Leigh insisted.

"But I can grow to look like *any* thing I want to — like a big elephant or a hippopopamus or a — angel, or *any thing*," Thaine assured her.

"Well, escuse me from any of the free — a angel or a elephant. I don't know what the poppy one is, but it's too poppy," Leigh said decisively.

There were others in the Grass River settlement who would have envied the mythical Prince Quippi also. For even at six years of age Leigh had the same quality that marked her uncle. People must love her if they cared for her at all; and they couldn't help caring for her. She fitted into the life of the prairie, too, as naturally as Thaine Aydelot did, who was born to it. The baby gold was soon lost from her hair for the brown-gold like the shimmering sunlight on the brown prairie. The baby blue eyes deepened to the deep violet-blue of overhead skies in June. The pretty pink and white complexion, however, did not grow brown under the kisses of the prairie winds. The delicate china-doll tinting went with other baby features, but, save for the few little brown freckles in mid-summer,

Leigh Shirley kept year after year the clear complexion with the peach blossom pink on her cheeks that only rarely the young girls of the dry western plains possessed in those days of shadeless homes.

Thaine Aydelot looked like a gypsy beside her, he was so brown, and his big dark eyes and heavy mane of dark hair, and ruddy cheeks made the contrast striking. From the first day of their meeting, the children were playmates and companions as often as opportunity offered. They sat together in the Grass River Sabbath School; they exchanged days on days of visits, and the first sorrow of their hitherto unclouded lives came when they found that Leigh was too far away to attend the week-day school.

Settlers were filling up the valley rapidly, but they all wanted ranches, and ranches do not make close neighbors. Land-lust sometimes overshadows the divine rights of children. And the lower part of the settlement was not yet equal to the support of a school of its own.

The two families still kept the custom of spending their Sabbaths together. And one Sabbath Thaine showed Leigh the books and slate and sponge and pencils he was to take to school the next week. Leigh, who had been pleased with all of them, turned to her guardian, saying gravely:

"Uncle Jim, can I go to school wif Thaine?"

"You must meet that question every day now, Jim," Asher said. "Why not answer it and be rid of it?"

"How can I answer it?" Jim queried.

"Virgie, help us with this educational problem of the State," Asher turned to his wife. "Women are especially resourceful in these things, Jim. I hope Kansas will fully recognize the fact some day."

"Who is Kansas?" Virginia asked with a smile.

"Oh, all of us men who depend so much on some woman's brain every day of our lives," Jim assured her. "Tell me, what to do for my little girl. Mrs. Bennington and some of the other neighbors say I should send her East for her sake—"

"And for both of your sakes, Jim, I say, no," Virginia broke in. "The way must open for all of our children here. It always has for everything else, you know."

"Thaine can walk the two miles. He's made of iron, anyhow. But Leigh can't make the five miles 'up stream,'" Asher declared.

"Jim," Virginia Aydelot said gravely, "Pryor Gaines will be our teacher for many years, we hope, but he is hardly equal to tilling his ground now. John Jacobs holds the mortgage on his claim still that he put there after the grasshopper loan, which he could not pay. Life is an up-hill pull for him, and he bears his burdens so cheerfully. I believe Mr. Jacobs would take the claim and pay him the equity. We all know how unlike a Shylock John Jacobs really is, even if he is getting rich fast. Now, Jim, why not take Pryor into your home and let him drive up to the school with Leigh and the other little folks down your way. We can pay him better wages and he will have a real home, not a lonely cabin by himself, and you will be fortunate in having such a man in your household."

"Just the thing, Virginia," Jim declared. "Why haven't we done it before? He always says I'm his heart and he's my lungs. We might stack up to a one-man power. Old bachelors should be segregated, anyhow, out here. The West needs more families. And think what Pryor Gaines'

cultivated mind will mean to a little artist soul like Leigh Shirley's. Glorious!"

"Well, Virgie, if you will also segregate John Jacobs and Dr. Carey, we'll settle the bachelors once for all. A quartette of royal good fellows, too, State-makers who really make. They ought to be in the legislature, but Carey and Pryor are democrats and Jim and Jacobs are republican. They balance too well for the interests of any party. Anyhow, if Pryor agrees, the school problem is fixed," Asher asserted.

Pryor Gaines did agree, to the welfare of many children, who remember him still with that deep-seated affection of student for teacher unlike any other form of human devotion. But especially did this cultured man put into Leigh Shirley's life a refining artistic power that stood her well in the years to come.

CHAPTER XI

Lights and Shadows

They saw not the shadow that walked beside,
They heard not the feet with silence shod.
—Whittier.

WITH successive seasons of good crops, combining with the time of the crest between two eras of financial depression, and with Eastern capital easy to reach, a mania of speculation known as "the boom" burst forth; a mania that swept men's minds as prairie fires sweep along the wide lengths of the plains, changing both the face of the land and the fortunes of the land owners, and marking an epoch in the story of the West. New counties were organized out of the still unoccupied frontier. Thousands of citizens poured into these counties. Scores of towns were chartered and hundreds of miles of railroad were constructed. Colleges and universities sprouted up from the virgin soil of the prairie. Loans on real estate were easy to secure. Land, especially in town lots, took on an enormously inflated valuation and the rapid investment in real estate and the rapid transference from buyer to seller was bewildering, while voting bonds for extensive and extravagant improvements in cities-to-be was not the least phase of this brief mania of the fortune-making, fortune-breaking "boom."

When Hans Wyker had seen his own town wane as Careyville waxed, he consigned the newer community, and all that it was, to all the purgatories ever organized and some yet to be created.

Wykerton was at a standstill now. The big brewery had become a flouring mill, but it was idle most of the time. The windows served as targets for the sons of the men who consumed its brewing product in other days, and the whole structure had a disconsolate, dismantled appearance.

There was neither a schoolhouse nor a church inside the corporation limits. The land along Big Wolf was not like the rich prairies west of it, and freeholds entered first with hopes in Wykerton's prosperity had proved disappointing, if not disastrous, to their owners.

The rough ground, mortgaged now, and by the decline of the town, decreased in value, began to fall into the hands of John Jacobs, who made no effort at settlement, but turned it to grazing purposes. His holdings joined the property foreclosed by Wyker when his town failed, but inhabited still by tenants too poor to leave it. The boundary line between Wyker and Jacobs was the same ugly little creek that Doctor Carey had turned his course to avoid on that winter day when he had seen Virginia Aydelot's distress signal and heard her singing a plaintive plea for help.

It was an ugly little stream, with much mire and some quicksand to be avoided; with deep earth-canyons and sliding avalanches of dirt on steep slopes, and now and then a stone outcrop jagged and difficult, not to say dangerous, to footways, and impossible to stock. It was called Little Wolf because it was narrower than the willow-fringed stream into which it emptied. But Big Wolf Creek could rarely boast of half the volume of water that the sluggish little tributary held. Big Wolf was shallow, with more

shale and sand along its bed. Little Wolf was narrow and deceivingly deep in places.

One Spring day, John Jacobs and Asher Aydelot rode out to Jacobs' ranches together.

"You are improving your stock every year, Stewart tells me," Asher was saying. "I may try sheep myself next year."

"I am hoping to have only thoroughbreds some day. That's a good horse you ride," Jacobs replied.

"Yes, he has a strain of Kentucky blue-blood. My wife owned a thoroughbred when we came West. We keep the descent still. We've never been without a black horse in the stable since that time. Do we turn here?"

They were following the lower trail by the willows, when Jacobs turned abruptly to a rough roadway leading up a shadowy hollow.

"Yes. It's an ugly climb, but much shorter to the sheep range and the cattle are near."

"How much land have you here, Jacobs?" Asher asked.

"From Little Wolf to the corporation line of Wykerton. Five hundred acres, more or less; all fenced, too," Jacobs added. "This creek divides Wyker's ground from mine. All the rest is measured by links and chains. We agreed to metes and bounds for this because it averages the same, anyhow, and I'd like a stream between Wyker and myself in addition to a barbed wire fence. It gives more space, at least."

They had followed the rough way only a short distance when Asher, who was nearest the creek, halted. The bank was steep and several feet above the water.

"Does anybody else keep sheep around here?" he inquired.

"Not here," John Jacobs answered.

"Look over there. Isn't that a sheep?"

Asher pointed to a carcass lying half out of the water on a pile of drift where the stream was narrow, but too deep for fording.

"Maybe some dog killed it and the carcass got into the creek. My sheep can't get to the water because my pasture is fenced. That's on Wyker's side, anyhow. I won't risk fording to get over there. It's as dead right now as it will ever be," Jacobs asserted.

Their trail grew narrower and more secluded, winding up a steep hill between high banks. Half way up, where the road made a sharp turn, a break in the side next to the creek opened a rough way down to the water. As they neared this, a woman coming down the hill caught sight of the two horsemen around the bend, and made a swift movement toward this opening in the bank, as if to clamber down from their sight. She was not quick enough, however, and when she found she had been seen, she waited by the roadside until the men had passed on.

Asher, who was next to her, looked keenly at her as he bade her good morning, but John Jacobs merely lifted his hat without giving her more than a glance.

The woman stared at both, but made no response to their greetings. She was plainly dressed, with a black scarf tied over her tow-colored hair. She had a short club in one hand and a big battered tin can in the other, which she seemed anxious to conceal. When the men had passed,

she looked after them with an ugly expression of malice in her little pale gray eyes.

"That's a bad face," Asher said, when they were out of her hearing. "I wonder why she tried to hide that old salt can."

"How do you know it was a salt can?" Jacobs asked.

"Because it is exactly like a salt can I saw at Pryor Gaines' old cabin, and because some salt fell out as she tipped it over," Asher replied.

"You have an eye for details," Jacobs returned. "That was Gretchen Gimpke, Hans Wyker's girl. She married his bartender, and is raising a family of little bartenders back in the hilly country there, while Gimpke helps Hans run a perfectly respectable tavern in town."

"Well, I may misjudge her, but if I had any interest near here, I should want her to keep on her own side of the creek," Asher declared.

And somehow both remembered the dead sheep down in the deep pool at the foot of the hill.

The live sheep were crowding along the fence on the creek side of the big range when the two men entered it.

"What ails the flock?" Asher asked, as they saw it following the fence line eagerly.

"Let's ride across and meet them," Jacobs suggested.

The creek side was rough with many little dips and draws hiding the boundary line in places. The men rode quietly toward the flock by the shortest way. As they faced a hollow deepening to a draw toward the creek, Asher suddenly halted.

"Look at that!" he cried, pointing toward the fence.

John Jacobs looked and saw where the ground was

lowest that the barbed wires had been dragged out of place, leaving an opening big enough for two or more sheep to crowd through at a time. As they neared this point, Asher said:

"It's a pretty clear case, Jacobs. See that line of salt running up the bare ground, and here is an opening. The flock is coming down on that line. They will have a chance to drink after taking their salt."

John Jacobs slid from his horse, and giving the rein to Asher, he climbed through the hole in the fence and hastily examined the ground beyond it.

"It's a friendly act on somebody's part," he said grimly. "The creek cuts a deep hole under the bank here. There's a pile of salt right at the edge. Somebody has sprinkled a line of it clear over the hill to toll the flock out where they will scramble for it and tumble over into that deep water. All they need to do is to swim down to the next shallow place and wade out. The pool may be full of them now, waiting their turn to go. Sheep are polite in deep water; they never rush ahead."

"They swim well, too, especially if they happen to fall into the water just before shearing time when their wool is long," Asher said ironically.

"What did you say Gretchen Gimpke had in that tin can?" Jacobs inquired blandly.

"Oil of sassafras, I think," Asher responded, as he tied the horses and helped to mend the weakened fence.

"Nobody prospers long after such tricks. I'll not lose sleep over lost sheep," John Jacobs declared. "Let's hunt up the cattle and forget this, and the woman and the scary little twist in the creek trail."

"It's a friendly act on somebody's part,"
he said grimly

"Why scary?" Asher asked. "Are you so afraid of women? No wonder you are a bachelor."

Jacobs did not smile as he said:

"Once when I was a child I read a story of a man being killed at just such an out-of-the-way place. Every time I go up that crooked, lonesome hill road, I remember the picture in the book. It always makes me think of that story."

When the fence was made secure, the two rode away to look after the cattle. And if a Shadow rode beside them, it was mercifully unseen, and in nowise dimming to the clear light of the spring day.

It was high noon when they reached Wykerton, where Hans Wyker still fed the traveling public, although the flourishing hotel where Virginia Aydelot first met John Jacobs had disappeared. The eating-place behind the general store room was divided into two parts, a blind partition wall cutting off a narrow section across the farther end. Ordinary diners went through the store into the dining room and were supplied from the long kitchen running parallel with this room.

There were some guests, however, who entered the farther room by a rear door and were likewise supplied from the kitchen on the side. But as there was no opening between the two rooms, many who ate at Wyker's never knew of the narrow room beyond their own eating-place and of the two entrances into the kitchen covering the side of each room. Of course, the prime reason for such an arrangement lay in Wyker's willingness to evade the law and supply customers with contraband drinks. But the infraction of one law is a breach in the wall through which many lawless elements may crowd. The place became, by natural

selection, the council chamber of the lawless, and many an evil deed was plotted therein.

"How would you like to keep a store in a place like this, Jacobs?" Asher Aydelot asked, as the two men waited for their meal.

"I had the chance once. I turned it down. How would you like to keep a tavern in such a place?" Jacobs returned.

"I turned down a bigger tavern than this once to be a farmer. I have never regretted it," Asher replied.

"The Sunflower Ranch has always interested me. How long have you had it?" Jacobs asked.

"Since 1869. I was the first man on Grass River. Shirley came soon afterward," Asher said.

"And your ranches are typical of you, too," John Jacobs said thoughtfully. "How much do you own now?"

"Six quarters," Asher replied. "I've added piece by piece. Mortgaged one quarter to buy another. There's a good deal of it under mortgage now."

"You seem to know what's ahead pretty well," Jacobs remarked.

"I know what's in the prairie soil pretty well. I know that crops will fail sometimes and boom sometimes, and I know if I live I mean to own three times what I have now; that I'll have a grove a mile square on it, and a lake in the middle, and a farmhouse of colonial style up on the swell where we are living now and that neither John Jacobs nor the First National Bank of Careyville will hold any mortgage on it." Asher's face was bright with anticipation.

"You are a dreamer, Aydelot."

"No, Jim Shirley's a dreamer," Asher insisted. "Mrs. Aydelot and I planned our home the first night she came a

bride to our little one-roomed soddy. There are cottonwoods and elms and locust trees shading our house now where there was only a bunch of sunflowers then, and except for Jim's little corn patch and mine, not a furrow turned in the Grass River Valley. We have accomplished something since then. Why not the whole thing?"

"You have reason for your faith, I admit. But you are right, Shirley is a dreamer. What's the matter with him?"

"An artistic temperament, more heart than head, a neglected home life in his boyhood, and a fight for health to do his work. He'll die mortgaged, but he has helped so many other fellows to lift theirs, I envy Jim's 'abundant entrance' by and by. But now he dreams of a thousand things and realizes none. Poor fellow! His dooryard is a picture, while the weeds sometimes choke his garden."

"Yes, he'll die mortgaged. He's never paid me interest nor principal on my little loan, yet I'd increase it tomorrow if he asked me to do it," John Jacobs declared.

"You are a blood-sucking Shylock, sure enough," Asher said with a smile. "I wish Jim would take advantage of you and quit his talking about the boom and his dreams of what it might do for him."

"How soon will you be platting your Sunflower Ranch into town lots for the new town that I hear is to be started down your way?" John Jacobs inquired.

"Town lots do not appeal to me, Jacobs," Asher replied. "I'm a slow-growing Buckeye, I'll admit, but I can't see anything but mushrooms in these towns out West where there is no farming community about them. I've waited and worked a good while; I'm willing to work and wait a while longer. Some of my dreams have come true. I'll

hold to my first position, even if I don't get rich so fast."

"You are level-headed," Jacobs assured him. "You notice I have not turned an acre in on this boom. Why? I'm a citizen of Kansas. And while I like to increase my property, you know my sect bears that reputation—" Jacobs never blushed for his Jewish origin—"I want to keep on living somewhere. Why not here? Why do the other fellows out of their goods, as we Jews are always accused of doing, if it leaves me no customer to buy? I want farmers around my town, not speculators who work a field from hand to hand, but leave it vacant at last. It makes your merchant rich today but bankrupt in a dead town tomorrow. I'm a merchant by calling."

"Horace Greeley said thirty years ago that the twin curses of Kansas were the land agent and the one-horse politician," Asher observed.

"You are a grub, Aydelot. You have no ambition at all. Why, I've heard your name mentioned favorably several times for the legislature next winter," Jacobs insisted jokingly.

"Which reminds me of that rhyme of Hosea Bigelow:

> If you're arter folks o' gumption
> You've a darned long row to hoe.

"I'm not an office seeker," Asher replied.

"Do I understand you won't sell lots off that ranch of yours to start a new town, and you won't run for the legislature when you're dead sure to be elected. May I ask how you propose to put in the fall after wheat harvest?" Jacobs asked, with a twinkle in his black eyes.

"I propose to break ground for wheat again, and to

experiment with alfalfa, the new hay product, and to take care of that Aydelot grove and build the Aydelot lake in the middle of it. And I'll be supplying the wheat market and banking checks for hay one of these years when your town starters will be hunting clerkships in your dry goods emporium, and your farmers, who imagine themselves each a Cincinnatus called to office, will be asking for appointment as deputy county assessor or courthouse custodian. Few things can so unfit a Kansas fellow for the real business of life as a term in the lower house of the Kansas legislature. If you are a merchant, I'm a farmer, and we will both be booming the state when these present-day boomers are gone back East to wife's folks, blaming Kansas for their hard luck. Now, mark my words. But to change the subject," Asher said smiling, "I thought we should have company for dinner. I saw Darley Champers and another fellow head in here before us. Darley is in clover now, planning to charter a town for every other section on Grass River. Did you know the man who was with him?"

"That's one fly-by-night calling himself Thomas Smith. Innocent name and easy to lose if you don't want it. Not like Gimpke or Aydelot, now. He's from Wilmington, Delaware — maybe."

"You seem to doubt his genuineness," Asher remarked.

"I don't believe he will assay well," Jacobs agreed. "I've doubted him since the day he landed in Carey's Crossing fifteen years ago. Inside of an hour and a half I caught him and Champers in a consultation so secret they fastened newspapers across the window to keep from being seen."

"Where were you meanwhile?"

"Up on the roof, fixing the sign the wind had blown loose. When they saw me through the uncovered upper pane, they shaded that, too. I've little interest in a man like that."

"Does he come here often?" Asher inquired.

"He's here and away, but he never sets foot in Careyville. My guess is that he's a part of the 'Co.' of 'Champers and Co.' and that Hans Wyker is the rest of it. Also that in what they can get by fair means, each of the trio reserves the right to act alone and independently of the other two, but when it comes to a cut-throat game, they combine as readily as hydrogen and sulphur and oxygen; and, combined, they have the same effect on a proposition that sulphuric acid has on litmus paper. But this is all only a Jew's guess, of course. For myself, I have business with only one of the three, Wyker. He doesn't like my sheep, evidently, because he knows I keep track of his whisky selling in this town and keep the law forever hanging over him. But I've sworn under high heaven to fight that curse to humanity wherever I find it threatening, and under high heaven I'll do it, too."

Jacobs' face was the face of a resolute man with whom law was law. Then the two talked of other things as they finished their meal.

John Jacobs was city bred, a merchant by instinct, a Jew in religion, and a strictly honest and exacting business man. Asher Aydelot had been a country boy and was by choice a farmer. He was a Protestant of the Methodist persuasion. It must have been his business integrity that first attracted Jacobs to him. Jacobs was a timid man, and no one else in Kansas, not even Doctor Carey, understood him or appreciated him quite as keenly as Asher Aydelot did.

CHAPTER XII

The Fat Years

"The lean years have passed, and I approve of these fat ones."
"Be careful, old man. That way lies bad work."
—*The Light That Failed.*

JOHN JACOBS little realized how true was his estimate of the firm of "Champers & Co." Nor did he suspect that at this very minute the firm was in council in the small room beyond the partition wall—the "blind tiger" of the Wyker eating-house.

"I tell you it's our chance," Darley Champers was declaring emphatically. "You mustn't hold back your capital now. This firm isn't organized to promote health nor Sunday Schools nor some other fellow's fortune. We are together for yours truly, every one of us. If you two have some other games back of your own pocketbooks, they don't cut any against this common purpose. I'm for business for Darley Champers. That's why I'm here. I've got no love for Doc Carey, ruling men's minds like they was all putty, and him a putty knife to shape 'em finer yet. And another fellow I'd like to put down so hard he'll never get over it is that straight-up-and-down farmer, Asher Aydelot of the Sunflower Ranch, who walks like a military captain, and works like a hired man, and is so danged independent he don't give a damn for no man's opinion of him. If it hadn't been for him we'd a had the whole Grass River Valley now to speculate on. I'm something of a danged fool, but I knowed this boom was comin'. I felt it in my craw."

"So you always said, Champers," Thomas Smith broke in, "but it's been a century coming. And look at the capital I've sunk. If you'd worked that deal through, time of the drouth in seventy-four, we'd be in clover and no Careyville and no Aydelots in the way. I could have saved Asher's little bank stock then, too.

"You could?" Darley Champers stared at the speaker.

"Yes, if he'd given up right that first trip of yours down there. When he refused I knew his breed too well. He's as set and slow and stubborn as his old dad ever was. That's what ailed those two, they were too near alike; and you'll never catch Asher Aydelot bending to our plans now. I warn you."

"Well, but about this bank account?" Champers queried.

"Oh, the fates played the devil with everything in two weeks. Doc Carey got in with Miss Jane Aydelot down at Philadelphia, and she came straight to Cloverdale, and, woman-like, made things so hot there I had to let loose of everything at once or lose everything I had saved for myself. Serves her right, for Asher's pile went into the dump, although there's naturally no love lost between the two. But this Miss Jane is Aydelot clear through. She's so honest and darned set you can't budge her. But she's a timid woman and so she's safe if you keep out of her range. She won't chase you far, but she's got fourteen rattles and a button."

"Well, well, let her rattle, and get to pusiness," Hans Wyker demanded. "Here's Champers says he's here yust for pusiness and he wants to get Aydelot and Carey, too."

"Gentlemen!" Champers struck the table with his fist. "Let's play fair now, so's not to spoil each other's games.

I'll fix Aydelot if it's in me to do it, just because he's stood in my way once too often. But he's my side line, him and Carey is. I'm here for business. Tell me what you are here for."

Hans Wyker's little eyes were red with pent-up anger and malice as he burst out:

"Shentlemen, you know my hart luck. You see where I be today. I not repeat no tiresome history here. Kansas yust boomin'! Wykerton dead! Yon Yacob own all der groun' right oop to der corporation line on tree side, an' he not sell one inch for attitions to dis town. He say dere notings to keep town goin' in two, tree year. What we care? We be rich by den an' let it go to der devil. But he not sell. Den I go mit you and we organize town company. We mark townsite, we make Grass River sell to us. We boom! boom! boom! We knock Careyville from de prairie alretty, mak' Yon Yacob go back to Cincinnati where he belong mit his Chews. He damned queer Chew, but he Chew all de same all right, all right. I want to down Yon Yacob, an' I do it if it take tree hundred fifty years. I'll kill him if he get in my way. I hate him. He run me off my saloon in ol' Carey Crossin'; my prewery goin' smash mit der damned prohibittery law; he growin' rich in Careyville, an' me!"

His voice rose to a shriek and he stamped his foot in rage.

"Hold your noise, Wyker!" Champers growled. "Don't you know who's on the other side of that partition?"

"I built that partition mineself. It's von dead noise-breaker," Wyker began. But Champers broke in:

"It's your turn, Smith."

Dr. Carey had described Smith once as rather small, with close-set dark eyes and a stiff, half-paralyzed right arm and wrist, a man who wrote in a cramped left-handed style. There was a crooked little scar cutting across his forehead now above the left eye that promised to stay there for life. He had a way of evading a direct gaze, suggesting timidity. And when Hans Wyker had threatened to kill John Jacobs he shivered a little, and for the instant a gray pallor crept across his face, unnoted by his companions.

"We propose to start a town in the Grass River country that will kill Careyville. We two put up the capital. You do the buying and selling. We'll handle real estate lively for a few months. We'll advertise till we fill the place with buyers, and we'll make our pile right there and then — and it's all to be done by Darley Champers & Co. We two are not to be in the open in the game at all."

Thomas Smith spoke deliberately. There seemed to be none of Champers' bluster nor Wyker's malice in the third part of the company, or else he was better schooled in self-control.

"You have it exactly," Champers declared. "The first thing is to take in fellows like Jim Shirley and Cyrus Bennington and Todd Stewart, and Aydelot, if we can."

"Yes, if we can, but we can't," Thomas Smith insisted.

"And having got the land, with or without their knowing why, we boom her to destruction. But to be fair, now, why do you want to keep yourself in hiding, and who's the fellow you want to kill?" Darley Champers said with a laugh.

"I may as well let you know now why I can't be known

in this," Thomas Smith said smoothly, even if the same gray hue did flit like a shadow a second time across his countenance — a thing that did not escape the shrewd eye of Darley Champers this time.

"Wyker is pitted against Jacobs. You are after Asher Aydelot's scalp, if you can get it. I must get Jim Shirley, fair or foul."

Smith's low voice was full of menace, boding more trouble to his man than the bluster and threat of the other two could compass.

"I paid you well, Darley Champers, for all information concerning Jim when I came here fifteen years ago. I was acting under orders, and as Jim would have known me then I had to keep out of sight a little."

"Vell, and vot has Shirley ever done mit you that you so down on him?" Hans Wyker asked.

The smooth mask did not drop from Smith's face, save that the small dark eyes burned with an intense glow.

"I tell you I was acting under orders from Shirley's brother Tank in Cloverdale, Ohio. And if Dr. Carey hadn't been so blamed quick I'd have gotten a letter Mrs. Tank Shirley had written to Jim the very day I got to Carey's Crossing. No brother ever endured more from the hands of a relative than Tank Shirley endured from Jim. In every way Jim tried to defraud him of his rights; tried to prejudice their own father against him; tried to rob him of the girl, a rich girl, too, that he married in spite of Jim — and at last contrived to prejudice his wife against him, and with Jane Aydelot interfering all the time, like the old maid that she is, managed to get Tank Shirley's

only child away from him and given legally to Jim. Do you wonder Tank hates his brother? You wouldn't if I dared to tell you all of Jim's cussedness, but some things I'm sworn to secrecy on. That's Tank's streak of kindness he can't overcome. Gets it from his mother. I'm his agent, and I'm paid for my work. You both understand me, I reckon."

"We unterstant, an' we stay py you to der ent," Hans Wyker exclaimed enthusiastically. But Darley Champers had a different mind.

"I'll watch you, my man, and I'll do business with you accordin'," he said to himself. "Devil knows whether you are Thomas Smith workin' for Tank Shirley, or Tank Shirley workin' for hisself under a assoomed name. Long as I get your capital to push my business I don't care who you are." Aloud he remarked:

"So that's how Jim Shirley got that little girl. She's a comely youngun, anyhow. But Smith, since you are only an agent and nobody knows it but us, why keep yourself so secret? Where's the harm in letting Shirley lay eyes on you? Why not come out into the open? How'll Shirley know you from the Mayor of Wilmington, Delaware, anyhow?"

Thomas Smith's face was ashy and his voice was hoarse with anger as he replied:

"Because I'm not now from Wilmington, Delaware, any more than I ever was. I'm from Cloverdale, Ohio. You know, Wyker, how I lost money in your brewery, investing in machinery and starting the thing, only to go to smash on us."

He turned on Hans fiercely.

"And you know how I lost by you in this town and the land around it. It was my money took up all this ground to help build up Wykerton and you, as my agent, sold every acre of it to Jacobs."

This as fiercely as Darley Champers.

Both men nodded and Darley broke in:

"I was honest. I thought Jacobs was gettin' it to boom Wykerton with, or I'd never sold. And him bein' right here was a danged sight easier'n havin' some man in Wilmington, Delaware, to write to. That's why I let him in on three sides, appealin' to his pride."

But Thomas Smith stopped him abruptly.

"Hold on! You need money to push your schemes now. And I'm the one who does the financing for you."

Both men agreed.

"Then it's death to either of you if you ever tell a word of this. You understand that? I'm not to be known here because I'm a dead man. I'm the cashier that was mixed up in the Cloverdale bank affair. And, as I say, if Jane Aydelot had let things alone Tank Shirley and I could have pulled out honorably, but, woman-like, because she had a lot of bank stock and was the biggest loser of anybody, in her own mind, she pushed things where a man would not have noticed or kept still, and she kept pushing year after year. Damn a woman, anyhow! All I could do at last was to commit suicide. Tank planned it. It saved me and helped Tank. You see, Miss Jane had a line around his neck, too. She was the only one who really saw me go down and she spread the report that I'd committed suicide on account of the bank failure. So, gentlemen, I'm really drowned in Clover Creek right above where

the railroad grade that cuts the Aydelot farm reaches the water."

Darley Champers wondered why Thomas Smith was so particular in his description.

"I've known Jim Shirley all my life. He was as bad a boy as ever left Cloverdale, Ohio, under a cloud. Got into trouble over some girl, I believe, finally. But you can see why I'm out of this game when it comes to the open. And maybe you could understand, if you knew the brothers as well as I do, why Tank keeps me after him. And I'll get him yet."

The vengeance of the last words was venomous.

"Well, now we understand each other we'll not be tramping on anybody's corns," Darley Champers urged, anxious to get away from the subject.

With all of his shortcomings he was a man of different mould from the other men. Eagerness to represent and invest large capital and to make by far the best of a bargain by any means just inside the law were his besetments. But he had not the unremitting hatred that enslaved Thomas Smith and Hans Wyker.

Champers' store of energy seemed exhaustless. Following this council he fell upon the Grass River Valley and threshed it to his profit.

One mid-June evening the Grass River schoolhouse was lighted early, while up from the prairie ranches came the work-worn farmers.

This year the crop outlook was bad, yet somehow an expectant spirit lifted sagging shoulders and looked out through hopeful eyes.

While the men exchanged neighborly greetings, a group

of children, the second generation in the valley, romped about in the twilight outside.

"Here comes Thaine," they shouted as Asher Aydelot and his boy came down the trail.

"Come on, Thaine," Leigh Shirley said, reaching for his hand. "We are going to play drop the handkerchief."

"Thaine's going to stand by me," pretty Jo Bennington declared, pushing Leigh boisterously aside.

Josephine, the week-old baby Mrs. Aydelot had gone to see one day nine years ago, had grown into a big, black-eyed, rosy-cheeked girl who lorded it over every other child in the neighborhood. And every other child submitted except Leigh Shirley, who had a quiet habit of going straight ahead about her affairs in a way that vexed the pretty Jo not a little. From the first coming of Leigh among the children Jo had resented her independence. But, young as they all were, she objected most to Thaine Aydelot's claiming Leigh as his playmate. Thaine was Jo's idol from earliest memory.

"What's the row here?" Todd Stewart, Junior, broke in. "You mustn't fuss or you'll all have to go in and listen to Darley Champers and I'll play out here by myself."

Todd was a young-hearted, half-grown boy now, able to work all day in the hayfield or to romp like a child with younger children in the evening. He was half a dozen years older than Thaine and Jo, a difference that would tend to disappear by the end of a decade.

"We'll be good, Toddie, if you'll let us stay and you'll play with us," the children entreated, and the game began, with Thaine between Leigh and Jo.

When Asher Aydelot joined the group inside Darley Champers rapped on the desk and called the men to order.

"Gentlemen, let's have a businesslike proceeding," he said. "Who shall preside at the meeting?"

"I move Jim Shirley be made chairman. He's the best looking man here," Todd Stewart said, half seriously.

The motion carried and Jim, looking big and handsome and kindly as always, took the chair.

"I'll ask Mr. Champers to state the purpose of the meeting," he said.

"Gentlemen," Champers began with tremendous dignity, "I represent the firm of the Champers Town Company, just chartered, with half a million dollars' capital. Gentlemen, you have the finest valley in Kansas."

The same was said of every other valley in Kansas in the fat years of the boom. But to do Darley justice, he had never made a finer effort in his life of many efforts than he was bent on making tonight.

"And this site is the garden spot of it all," he continued. "The elevation, the water power at the deep bend of Grass River [where at that moment only a trace of water marked the river's grassy right of way], the fine farming land — everything ready for a sudden leap into prosperity. And, gentlemen, the A. and T. [Arctic and Tropic] North and South Railroad will begin grading down this very stream inside of thirty days. A town here this year will be a city next year, a danged sight bigger city than Careyville will ever be. Why, that town's got its growth and is beginning to decay right now. The A. and T. will miss it comin' south, by ten mile."

He paused and looked at the men before him. They

were farmers, drooped to rest after the long summer day's work, yet they listened with intense eagerness. Only Asher Aydelot sat in easy dignity, looking straight at Darley Champers with steady interest. The four years' training in the University of the Civil War had not been overcome by his hold on the plow handles. And no farmer will grow hopelessly stooped in shoulders and sad of countenance who lifts his face often from the clods beneath his feet to the stars above his head.

"You all know crops was poor last year and only moderately promisin' this year," Champers continued. "But this is temporary and you are stayers, as I can testify. The Champers Town Company is ready to locate a townsite and start a town right here at the deep bend of Grass River. We propose to plat the prairie into town lots with a public square for the courthouse and sites for the railroad station and grain elevators, a big hotel, an opera house, and factories and foundries that's bound to come."

The speaker paused a moment. Then the inspiration of the evening came to him.

"When you first came here, Aydelot, there wasn't nothing but imagination to make this a farming community. And it looked lots more impossible then than this looks to me now. What's to prevent a metropolis risin' right here where a decade and a half ago there wasn't nothing but bare prairie?"

The appeal was forceful, and the very men who had stood like heroes against hardships and had fought poverty with a grim, unyielding will-power, the same men fell now before Darley Champers' smooth advances.

"Our company's chartered with no end of stock for sale now that in six months will be out of sight above par and can't be bought for no price. It's your time to invest now. You can easy mortgage your farms to raise the money, seein' you can knock the mortgage off so quick and have abundance left over, if you use your heads 'stead of your tired legs to make money out of your land."

Cyrus Bennington and Todd Stewart and Jim Shirley, with others, were sitting upright with alert faces now. Booms were making men rich all over Kansas. Why should prosperity not come to this valley as well? It was not impossible, surely. Only the unpleasant memory of Champers' holding back the supplies in the days when the grasshopper was a burden would intrude on the minds of the company tonight. Champers was shrewd to remember also, and he played his game daringly as well as cautiously.

"Maybe some of you fellows haven't felt right toward me sometimes," he said. "I hate to tell it now, but justice is justice. The truth is, it was a friend of yours who advised me not to let any supplies come your way, time of the grasshopper raid. I listened to him then and didn't know no better'n to be run by him till I see his scheme to kill Wykerton an' build a town for hisself. He'll deny it now, declare he never done it, and he'll not do a thing for your town down here. See if he does. But it's Gawd's truth, he held me back so's he could run you his way. It's your turn to listen to me now and believe me, too."

And well they listened, especially the men who still owed John Jacobs for the loan of 1874.

"You can have a boom right here that'll make you all rich men inside of a year. Why not turn capitalists your-

selves for a while, you hard-working farmers. Money is easy and credit long, now. Take your chance at it and make five hundred per cent on your investments. I'm ready to take subscriptions for stock in this new town right now. Why not stop this snail's pace of earnin' and go to livin' like gentlemen — like some Careyville men I know who own hundreds of acres they never earned and they won't improve so's to help others?"

"You're right there," a farmer sitting beside Asher Aydelot called out. "We all know how Careyville got her start. It's kept some of us poor doing it. I'll invest in Town Company stock right now."

Asher Aydelot turned toward the speaker in surprise.

"Jacobs helped you out as well as the rest of us in the drouth and grasshopper time of seventy-four," he said. "What's your grievance against him now?"

"Yes, and hung onto me like a leech of a Jew ever since," the man muttered.

"Because you never paid either interest or principal. And Jacobs has carried you along and waited your time," Asher asserted frankly.

But the farmer plunged into the discussion again, not realizing that his grudge against Careyville was the outgrowth of his own shortcomings.

"Take this site right here in the middle of your neighborhood where you've already got your church and your schoolhouse, and your graveyard," Champers declared. "Aydelot here gave part of it and Pryor Gaines the rest. Gaines don't farm it any more himself, it's most too big a job for a man of brains like him. And that quarter across the river that used to be all sand, you own that now,

Aydelot, don't you? What did you think of doin' with it now?"

"I think I'll set it in alfalfa this fall," Asher replied.

"Yes, yes, now these two make the very site we want. You are lucky, for you are ready right now to start things. How much stock do you want, Aydelot, and how will you sell?"

As Asher listened he seemed to see the whole scheme of the town builder bare itself before him, and he wondered at the credulity of his neighbors.

"Gentlemen," he said, standing before them, "it is a hard thing to put yourself against neighborhood sentiment and not seem to be selfish. But as I was the first man in this valley and have known every man who settled here since, I ought to be well enough known to you to need no certificate of good moral character here. I offer no criticism on the proposition before you. You are as capable of judging as I am. The end may show you more capable, but I decline to buy stock, or to donate, or sell any land for a townsite at the deep bend of Grass River. A man's freehold is his own."

Asher's influence had led in Grass River affairs for years. But Darley Champers had the crowd in the hollow of his paw tonight.

"How about Gaines?" he demanded. "You join him on the south. You ought to know some of his notions."

"Gaines has no land to consider," Asher said frankly. "He sold it more than a year ago."

"You mean the Jew foreclosed on the preacher, don't you?" someone said sarcastically.

"You'll have to ask the preacher," Asher replied good-

naturedly. "I didn't understand it so at the time. But as for myself, I'm no boomer. I stand for the prosperity that builds from day to day, and stays built. The values here are *in* the soil, not in the shining bubbles that glitter and burst *on top* of it. You'll have to count me out of your scheme. I'm a farmer still. So I'll wish you all good luck and good night."

"Good night, I must go with papa," Thaine Aydelot said, springing up from his play outside.

"No, you've got to stay here. Hold him, Leigh," Jo Bennington commanded, clutching at Thaine's arm.

Leigh sat calmly disobedient.

"He's his papa's boy, I guess, and he ought to go," she asserted.

"You meany, meany," Jo whispered, "I don't like you."

But Leigh paid little heed to her opinion.

As Asher passed out of the room there was an ugly look in Darley Champers' eyes.

"No more ambition than a cat. One of them quiet, good-natured fellers that are as stubborn as the devil once they take a stand. Just a danged clod-hopper farmer, but he don't leave no enemies behind him. That's enough to make any man hate him. He's balked twice when I tried to drive. I'll not be fooled by him always."

So Champers thought as he watched Asher Aydelot walk out of the room. And in the silence that followed his going the company heard him through the open window whistling some old patriotic air as he strode away in the June moonlight with little Thaine trotting beside him.

"Shirley, where is Pryor tonight?" Cyrus Bennington broke the silence with the query.

"I couldn't get him to come; said he had no land for sale nor money to invest," Jim replied.

"Then Jacobs got him at last. Fine friend to you fellers, that man Jacobs. Easy to see what he wants. He ain't boomin' no place but Careyville," Champers snarled. "But the deep bend ain't the only bend in Grass River. Or do you want to shove prosperity away when it comes right to your door?"

Nobody wants to do that. Least of all did the Kansas settlers of the boom days turn away from the promise of a fortune.

So the boom came to the Grass River Valley as other disasters had come before it. Where a decade and a half ago Asher and Virginia Aydelot had lived alone with each other and God, in the heart of the wide solitary wilderness, the town of Cloverdale was staked out now over the prairie.

Stock in the new venture sold rapidly, and nobody ever knew how much clear profit came to Champers & Co. from this venture. A big slice of the Cloverdale ranch went into the staking of the new city, and prosperity seemed wedded to Jim Shirley. He ceased farming and became a speculator with dreams of millions in his brain. Other settlers followed his example until the fever had infected every man in the community except Asher Aydelot, who would not give up to it, and Pryor Gaines, who had nothing to give up.

Everything fell out as advertised. The railroad grade swelled up like a great welt across the land, seemingly in a day. Suburban additions radiated for miles in every direction. Bonds were voted for light and water and public buildings and improvements. Speculators rushed to invest

and unload their investments at a profit. The Grass River Farmers' Company built the Grass River Creamery. And because it looked big and good they built the Grass River Sugar Factory and the Grass River Elevator. But while they were building their money into stone and machinery they forgot to herd cattle to supply the creamery and to grow cane for the sugar product and to sow and reap grain to be elevated.

Also, the Cloverdale Farmers' Company, made up mostly of the members of the Grass River Farmers' Company, built the Cloverdale Hotel, and the Cloverdale State Bank, and the Cloverdale Office Block. And the sad part of it all was that mortgaged and doubly mortgaged farms and not the price of crops had furnished the capital for the boom building.

It is an old story now, and none too interesting — the story of a boom town, founded on prairie breezes and built out of fortune seekers' dreams.

Meanwhile, Asher Aydelot, watching the sudden easy prosperity of his neighbors, fought down the temptation to join them and resolutely strove with the soil for its best yield. The drouth and hot winds had not forgotten all their old tricks, and even the interest on his mortgage could not be met promptly sometimes. Yet with the same old Aydelot tenacity with which his father had held Cloverdale in Ohio away from the old farm beside the National pike road, the son of this father held the boundary of the Sunflower Ranch intact, nor yielded up one acre to be platted into a suburban addition to the new Cloverdale in the Grass River Valley in Kansas. And all the while the Aydelot windbreaks strengthened; the Aydelot grove struck

deeper root; the long corn furrows and the acres on acres of broken wheat stubble of the Sunflower Ranch wooed the heavier rainfall, narrowing the sand dunes and deepening the water courses.

For two brief years Cloverdale, in the Grass River Valley in Kansas, had a name, even in the Eastern money markets. Speculation became madness; and riotous commercialism had its little hour of strut and rave.

Then the bubble burst, and all that the boom had promised fell to nothingness. Many farms were mortgaged, poor crops worked tribulation, taxes began to eat up acres of weed-grown vacant town lots, Eastern money was withdrawn to other markets, speculators departed, the strange enthusiasm burned itself out, and the Wilderness came again to the Grass River Valley. Not the old Wilderness of loneliness, and drouth, and grasshoppers, and prairie fires that had dared the pioneer to conquest; but the Prairie, waiting again the kingly hand on the plow handle, gave no quarter to him whom the gilded boom had lured to shipwreck.

PART TWO

THE SON

Give me the land where miles of wheat
Ripple beneath the wind's light feet,
Where the green armies of the corn
Sway in the first sweet breath of morn;
Give me the large and liberal land
Of the open heart and the generous hand;
Under the wide-spaced Kansas sky
Let me live and let me die.

—HARRY A. KEMP.

CHAPTER XIII

The Rollcall

Nothing is too late
Until the tired heart shall cease to palpitate.
—Longfellow.

THE twilight had fallen on the prairie. Grass River, running bank full from the heavy May rains, lay like a band of molten silver glistening in the after-sunset light. The draw, once choked with wild plum bushes in the first days of the struggle in the wilderness, was the outlet now to the little lake that nestled in the heart of the Aydelot grove. The odors of early summer came faintly on the soft twilight breeze. Somewhere among the cottonwoods a bird called a tender goodnight to its mate. Upon the low swell the lights were beginning to twinkle from the windows of the Aydelot home, and the sounds of voices and of hurrying footsteps told of something unusual going on within. Asher Aydelot, driving down the old Grass River trail, saw from far away the windows of his home beginning to glow like beacons in the twilight. Beyond it was the glimmer of the waters of the river and before it spread the mile-long grove, dim and shadowy in the mist-folds rising up from the prairie.

"A man can win a kingdom in the West, I told my mother one spring evening long ago," he murmured as his eyes took in the view. "It's surely more like a kingdom now than it was when we came down this trail a quarter of a century ago. Twenty-five good years of life, but it's

worth the effort, and we are just now at the opening of our best years. A man's real usefulness begins at fifty. This is more like a kingdom, too, than it was ten years ago when those old hulks of wrecks that strew the prairie down the river were banks, and hotels, and opera houses, and factories of boomed-up Cloverdale. We are doing something for the land. I hope our boy will make up his mind to want to keep it when his time comes."

He lifted his head bravely, as if to throw off all doubt, and tightening the reins on his horses he swung away down the trail toward the home lights shining in the gathering gloom.

As he neared the house Thaine Aydelot leaped from the side porch and hurried toward him. Climbing into the moving wagon, he put one hand affectionately on his father's shoulder.

"Don't you know whose birthday this is?" he inquired with serious countenance, "and you've not spoken to me all day."

"I know my boy is nineteen today and expects to have a birthday party here tonight, and that I left him asleep when I started to town this forenoon about nine o'clock."

"Nine cats! You left at six sharp to go with John Jacobs over to Wolf Creek after what you never got, judging from this empty wagon. And I had half of the feeding done when you left the house here. I saw you when I was out by the old stone corral looking after the pigs, but they squealed so loud you could not hear me telling you goodby."

"All pigs squeal alike to me," Asher began, but Thaine choked him to silence.

"Hurry up and get togged out for the party," he urged. "The Benningtons will be over early. Jo's been here all day. I'll take care of the horses. Hike!"

"Be sure to rub them down. They had to pull hard today," Asher called back as he went up the walk toward the house.

"Oh, fiddle! Always take care of a horse like it was a prize poodle. Farms like he was decorating chinaware. Good enough dad, but too particular. Me for the State University and the professional or military life. This ranch is all right for Asher Aydelot, but it's pretty blamed slow for T. A. And Jo Bennington doesn't like a farm either," he added with a smile.

In the superiority of his youth Thaine fumed at his father's commands, but failed not to obey them. He was just nineteen, as tall as his father, and brawny with the strength of the outdoors life of the prairie ranch. Strength of character was not expressed in his face so much as the promise of strength with the right conditions for its development in future days. His features were his mother's set in masculine lines, with the same abundant dark hair, the same lustrous dark eyes, the same straight nose and well-formed chin. The same imperious will of all the Thaines to do as he chose was his heritage, too, and he walked the prairies like a king.

"The real story of the plains is the story of the second generation; the real romance here will be Thaine Aydelot's romance, for he was born here."

So Virginia Aydelot had declared on the day she had gone to visit the Bennington baby, Josephine, and coming home had met Asher with little Thaine beside Mercy Pen-

nington's grave. Sorrow for the dead had become a tender memory that day, and joy in the living made life full of hope.

In Virginia's mind a pretty romance was begun in which Thaine and Josephine were central figures. For mothers will evermore weave romances for their children so long as the memory of their own romance lives.

The time of the second generation came swiftly, even before the wilderness of the father's day had been driven entirely from the prairie. Some compensation for the loss of eastern advantages belonged to the simple life of the plains children. If they lacked the culture of city society they were also without its frivolity and temptations. What the prairies denied them in luxuries they matched with a resourcefulness to meet their needs. Something of the breadth of the landscape and of the free sweeping winds of heaven gave them breadth and power to look the world squarely in the face, and to measure it at its true value, when their hour for action came.

The Grass River children could ride like Plains Indians. They could cut a steer out of a herd and prevent or escape a stampede. They had no fear of distance, nor storm, nor prairie fire, nor blizzard. Because their opportunities were few, they squandered them the less. Matched against the city-bred young folks their talents differed in kind, not in number, nor in character-value.

Tonight the Aydelots were to give a party in honor of Thaine's birthday, and the farmhouse was dressed for the occasion. Thaine had been busy all day carrying furniture in or out, mowing the front lawn where the old double fire-guard once lay, and fixing a seat under the white honey-

suckle trellis, "for the afflicted ones," he declared to pretty Jo Bennington. Jo's blush was becoming. Thaine felt sure that he must be in love with her. All the other boys were, too, he knew that well enough.

"What's going on in the dining room?" Asher asked, as he sat at supper with Virginia in the kitchen.

"The decorating committee is fixing it up for dancing. Bo Peep is coming with his fiddle and there'll be a sound of revelry by night."

"Who's the decorating committee?" Asher inquired.

"Jo Bennington is helping Thaine, and our new hired girl, Rosie Gimpke, from over on Little Wolf. She came this morning just after you left," Virginia replied. "She acts and looks like she'd never had a kind word spoken to her."

"Rosie Gimpke must be Hans Wyker's granddaughter. There's a nest of them over on Little Wolf. They give John Jacobs no end of trouble, but you must have help," Asher said thoughtfully.

Virginia's mind was not on hired help, however, as the sound of laughter came from the dining room.

"The bridal wreath and snowballs make it look like a wedding was expected in there," she declared.

"Will the Arnolds and the Archibalds be up? Have you heard from the Spoopendykes and the Gilliwigs?" Asher inquired with a smile.

"Oh, Asher! What a change since the days when we invented parties for our lonely evenings here! What has become of the old prairie?"

"It's out there still, under the wheat fields. We have driven the wilderness back; plowed a fireguard around the

whole valley; tempered the hot winds by windbreaks and groves."

"It seems impossible that there ever was a one-room sod cabin here, and only you and I and Jim and faithful old Pilot in all the valley."

"Since so many things have come true it may be that many more will also by the time Thaine is as old as I was when I came out here and thought the Lord had forgotten all about this prairie until I reminded Him of it. We can almost forget the hard work and the waiting for results," Asher said.

"Oh, we don't want to forget," Virginia replied. "Not a season's joy or sorrow but had its uses for us. Do you remember that first supper here and the sunflowers in the old tin can?"

"Yes, and Jim sitting outside so lonely. What a blessing Leigh has been to his life. There they come now."

The next moment Jim's tall form filled the doorway.

"Good evening, folks. I can't resist the habit of the sod shack days to come right into the kitchen. I understand that we forty-niners are to have an old settlers' reunion while the young folks dance," he said.

There were lines of care on his face now, suggesting a bodily weariness that might never grow less. The old hopefulness and purpose seemed fading away. But the kindly light of the eyes had not disappeared, nor the direct gaze of an honest man whose judgment might bring him to tragedy, while his sense of honor was still sublime.

"Come in, Jim. Where are Pryor and Leigh? Did you take it you were all we expected?" Asher asked.

"Leigh went in the front door like a Christian. As to

Pryor," he hesitated a moment. "I'll tell you later about him."

"Take this chair. I must help the children," Virginia said cordially as she rose and left the kitchen.

Leigh Shirley was coming from the front hall as she entered the dining room, and Virginia paused a moment to look at her. Something about Leigh made most people want more than a glance. Tonight, as she stood in the doorway, Virginia could think of nothing but the pink roses that grew in the rose garden of the old Thaine mansion house of her girlhood. A vision swept across her memory of Asher Aydelot — just Thaine's age then — of a moonlit night, sweet with the odor of many blossoms, and the tinkling waters of the fountain in the rose garden, and herself a happy young girl.

Leigh's fair face was set in the golden brown shadows of her hair. On either side of her square white forehead the sunny ripples kept the only memory of the golden curls of babyhood. The darker eyebrows and heavy lashes and the deep violet-blue eyes, the pink bloom of the cheeks, and the resolute mouth gave to Leigh's face all the charm of the sweet young girl. But the deeper charm that claimed the steady gaze lay in the spirit back of the face, in the self-reliance and penetrating power, combined with something of the artist's dreams; and swayed altogether by genuine good nature and good will.

Tonight she wore a simple white gown revealing her white throat and the line of her neck and shoulder. White flowers nestled in the folds of her hair, and the whole effect enhanced the dainty coloring of cheeks and lips. Leigh had an artist's eye in dress and knew by instinct what to

wear. She had an artist's hand also, as her mother had had before her, and was far more skilled in the painting of prairie landscapes than any of the Grass River folk dreamed of.

Thaine was busy on the top of the stepladder and did not see Leigh as she came in. Jo Bennington, who was holding sprays of spirea for him to festoon above the window, stared at Leigh until Thaine, waiting for the flowers, turned to see the pink-cheeked living picture framed against the shadows of the hall behind her.

"I thought you were coming early to help us. This Gimpke girl doesn't know how to do a thing," Jo exclaimed.

If her voice was a trifle high-pitched it was not out of keeping with her brilliant coloring and dashing manners. Even the thoughtless rebuke of the Gimpke girl seemed excusable from her lips, and Rosie Gimpke looked at her with unblinking eyes.

"You can put on my apron and finish, but don't change a thing, now mind. I'll go and dress. I brought my whole wardrobe over early in the week," Jo rattled on, and thrusting her gingham apron into Leigh's hands she dashed through the hall toward the stairway.

Rosie Gimpke, the tow-headed image of her mother, Gretchen Wyker, stared at Leigh, who smiled back at her. Rosie was stupid and ignorant, but she knew the difference between Jo Bennington's frown and Leigh Shirley's smile. A saving thing, the smile of good will, and worth its cost in any market.

"Shall I help you too, or shall Rosie and I look after the refreshments?" Virginia asked as she greeted Leigh.

"No, run along and get dressed. Rosie knows just

how to fix things in the kitchen, and I never need anybody else if Leigh can help me," Thaine declared. "How is this, Leigh?"

Leigh gave a quick glance and answered:

"Too heavy everywhere? Can we fix it right?"

"You bet we can. I'm not going to have a thing wrong tonight," Thaine answered her. "But Jo fixed it, and you know Jo."

Leigh made no reply, but went about the rearrangement with swift artistic skill; while Jo, who had changed her mind about being in a hurry, slipped down stairs to the dining room again. At the doorway she discovered the undoing of her work. For a minute or two she watched the pair, then passed unnoticed up stairs again. Leigh Shirley was the only girl who ever dared to oppose Jo, and she did it so quietly and completely that Jo could only ignore her. She could not retaliate.

"Jo Bennington, you are the prettiest girl in Kansas, and I claim the first dance and the last, and some in-betweens, right now," Thaine declared when she appeared again.

Jo was tall and graceful and imperious in her manner. The oldest and handsomest child in a large family, she had had her own way at home and with her associates all her life. Her world was made to give way to her from the beginning, until nothing seemed possible or popular without her sanction. Tonight her heavy black hair was coiled in braids about her head, her black eyes were full of youthful glow and her cheeks were like June roses. She wore a pink lawn dress vastly becoming to her style, and a string of old-fashioned pearl beads was wound through her dark braids.

"You'd better make amends for spoiling all my pretty work as you and Leigh have done," she said in reply to Thaine's frank compliment. "I'll make it a few more dances, for you do dance better than any of the other boys—"

"Except Todd Stewart, Junior," the owner of the name, who had just come in, declared. "There is to be a birthday party and an old settlers' meeting, and maybe a French duel or two before midnight. I remember when I was the only kid in the Grass River Valley. There were others at first, but I always thought the grasshoppers or Darley Champers ate 'em. And Jo is the first white girl baby born in captivity here. We'll lead the opening of this ball or shoot up the ranch. You can have Jo for the last dance, Thaine, my son, but me first."

"Oh, that's fine," Jo declared as Thaine was about to protest. "Serves you right for spoiling my decorations. But, Thaine, I claim you for the in-betweens and the last. Let's take one more look at the refreshments—that Gimpke girl may have them all in a mess by this time."

There was a rush for the kitchen, where Leigh Shirley was already showing Rosie how to keep the table of dishes in order.

Meanwhile, Asher Aydelot had gone out to the seat Thaine had put up under the honeysuckle trellis.

"It is early for the crowd, Virgie. Come here and watch Boanerges Peeperville tuning up," Asher Aydelot said as Virginia stood on the veranda a little later.

She came out to the seat under a bower of sweet white honeysuckle and sat down beside her husband.

"The same Bo Peep of the old Virginia days, only he

was a half-grown boy then," she said, watching the Negro bending above his violin. "How faithfully he has served Dr. Carey all these years. He's past forty now. Asher, we are all getting along."

"With a boy nineteen tonight, how can it be otherwise?" Asher replied. "But when the Careyville crowd gets here I'm going to ask you for a dance, anyhow, Miss Thaine."

Virginia stood in the moonlight and looked out over the prairie slumbering in a silver-broidered robe of evening mist.

"How fast the years have gone. Do you remember the night in the old Thaine home in Virginia when you were our guest — too sick to dance?" she asked.

Asher caught her arm and drew her to the seat beside him.

"I remember the jessamine vines and the arbor at the end of the rose garden."

"We are not old until we forget our own romance days," Virginia said. "You were my hero that night. You are my hero still."

"Even with a son as old now as I was that night? The real romance of the prairie, you've said it often, Virgie, is Thaine Aydelot's romance. There's little chance for the rest of us."

The coming of the guests just then called the host and hostess to the parlor, and the evening's festivities began.

In the building of the Aydelot home there was a memory of the old farmhouse beside the National pike road in Ohio and the old Thaine mansion house of the South. The picture the mirage had revealed to Virginia Aydelot on

the afternoon when she rode the long lonely miles from Wykerton with John Jacob's message of hope in her keeping — that wonderful mirage picture had grown toward a reality with the slowly winning years. Tonight, with the lighted rooms and the music of the violin, and the sound of laughter and the rhythm of dancing feet, and outside the May moonlight on the veranda with its vine-draped columns, and the big elm trees throwing long shadows down the lawn, with the odor of plowed fields and blossoming grain and shrub mingled with the perfume floating from the creamy catalpa blooms in the shadowy grove, all made a picture not unworthy to hang beside the painting of an Ohio landscape or an old Virginia mansion.

"Here's where the forty-niners get the best of it," Jim Shirley declared, as the older men gathered about the veranda steps. "We're dead certain of ourselves now. We're not like those youngsters in there with their battles before 'em."

"There hasn't been such a gathering as this in ten years. Not since the night Darley Champers herded us into the schoolhouse and blew a boom down our throats through a goosequill," Cyrus Bennington declared.

"See that black thing away across the prairie east of Aydelot's grove. Wait till the moon gets out from that cloud. Now!" Todd Stewart directed the eyes of all to a tall black object distinct in the moonlight.

"That's the Cloverdale Farmers' Company's elevator. Looks like a lighthouse stretching up in that sea of wheat."

"There are plenty of derelicts in that sea as well as some human derelicts left afloat," Jim said, with a laugh. "Let's take the census."

"Begin with Darley Champers," Asher suggested.

"Not present. Who got his excuse?" Jim inquired.

"He sent it by me," Horace Carey spoke up. "Business still keeping him busy. He's a humane man."

"Up to a point he is," John Jacobs broke in. "Let's be fair. He is a large-sized boomer and a small-sized rascal. A few deals won't bear the light of day, but mainly they are inside the law. I've let him handle all but my grazing land around Wykerton. He's done well by me. But he's been at his line a quarter of a century and he'll end where he began — in a real estate office over in Wykerton, trying to get something for nothing and calling it business."

"Horace Carey?" Jim Shirley called next.

"Here," Carey replied.

"With a big H," Todd Stewart declared. "Same doctor of the old school. Why don't you get married or take a trip to India, Doctor? Not that we aren't satisfied all over with you as you are, though, and wouldn't hear to your doing either one. You belong to all of us now."

"I may have a call to a bigger practice some day, a service that will make you proud of your former honorable townsman. At present I'm satisfied," Carey said, with a smile.

Four years later the men remembered this reply and the attractive face of the speaker, the sound of his voice, and the whole magnetic presence of the man.

"John Jacobs?" Shirley called next.

"The merchant prince of Careyville," Asher Aydelot declared. "The money-loaning Shylock. Didn't let the boom so much as turn one hair black or white. Land owner and stock raiser of the Wolf Creek Valley and

hater of saloons seven days in the week. Whatever it may mean in New York and Cincinnati and Chicago, being a Jew means being a gentleman in this corner of Kansas," Asher was running on, till John Jacobs threw a chair cushion at his head and Jim called out:

"Cyrus Bennington."

"Busted by the boom. Lived at the public crib ever since. Held every little county office possible to get, asking now for your votes this fall for County Treasurer. Will end his days seeking an election and go at last to be with the elected," Cyrus Bennington frankly described himself.

"Not so bad yet as Todd Stewart," Todd declared. "He lost everything in the boom except his old Scotch Presbyterian faith. Now head clerk in J. Jacobs' dry goods and general merchandise store. Had the good sense, though, this old Todd did, to send his son back to the land and make a farmer out of him, and the second generation of Stewarts in this valley promises to make it yet. Why don't you revert to the soil, too, Bennington?"

"Todd is doing well with his leases," Asher Aydelot declared. "He'll be a landowner yet."

"My family, especially the girls, object to living on a farm," Cyrus Bennington said gravely. "They have notions of city life I can't overcome. Jo especially dislikes the country and Jo runs things round the Bennington place."

"James Shirley, Esquire," Jim announced and added quickly:

"The biggest sucker in the booming gang. Lost his farm to the Champers Company. Holds a garden patch and homestead only, where once the Cloverdale Ranch

smiled. All under mortgage also to other capitalists. Boys, I'd be ready to give up if it wasn't for my little girl. What's the use in a man as big as I am, with no lung power, keeping at it?" There was a sad hopelessness in Shirley's tone.

"No, no!" the men chorused in one voice. "Go on, Jim, go on!"

"Asher Aydelot." Jim pretended it was the rollcall they demanded.

"Gentlemen," John Jacobs began seriously. But at that moment Leigh Shirley, followed by Rosie Gimpke, came from the side door with a tray of glasses and a pitcher of lemonade.

"Gentlemen, a toast to the man who stuck to the soil and couldn't be blasted to financial ruin by a boom, the wheat king of these prairies. Our host, Asher Aydelot."

"The clod-hopper, Buckeye farmer," Jim added affectionately, and they drank to Asher's health.

"Lord bless you, Aydelot. You said the money was in the soil, not on top of it. I remember you looked like a prophet when you said it," Cyrus Bennington declared. "But I was wild to get rich quick and let my soil go. I never look at Aydelot's spreading acres of wheat increasing in area every year without wondering why the Lord let me be such a fool."

"Well, you've spent a lot of days in an easy chair in the shade of a county office since then while I was driving a reaper in the hot sunshine," Asher insisted.

"You are the strongest man here now, for all your farm work, Aydelot," John Jacobs asserted. "It is the store that really breaks a man down."

"Not in his nerve, nor in pocketbook," Todd Stewart added. "Here's a toast, now, to the second generation, and especially to Thaine Aydelot, son of the Sunflower Ranch. Nineteen years old tonight."

"What is Thaine going to follow, Asher?" someone inquired. "I suppose you'll be making a gentleman out of him, since he's your only child."

"My father tried to make a gentleman out of me and failed, as you see," Asher replied.

"Tragic failure," Jim groaned.

"Seriously, Aydelot, what's Thaine to do?" The query came from Dr. Carey; the company awaited the answer.

"He isn't wanting to follow anything right now. He has a notion that the earth is following him," Asher said with a smile. "And having handled Aydelots all my life, I'm letting him alone a little with the hope that at last he'll come back to the soil as I did. He goes to the Kansas University this fall and he has all sorts of notions, even a craving for military glory. I can't blame him. I had the same disease once. I don't believe in any wild oats business. I hope Thaine will be a gentleman, but I don't wonder that a green country boy who has looked out all his life on open prairies and lonely distances should have a longing for city pavements and the busy haunts of men. How well he will make his way and what he will let these things fit him to do depends somewhat on how well grounded the farm life and home life have made him. The old French Aydelot blood had something of the wanderlust in it. I hope that trait may not reappear in Thaine. But where's Pryor Gaines in this rollcall? We are getting away from the subject before the house."

Jim Shirley's handsome face grew sorrowful.

"He was not affected by the boom. He has been the same man in spirit and fortune for twenty-five years. But we are going to lose him. That's why he's not here tonight," Jim hurried on as the others were about to interrupt him. "He won't say good-by to anybody. You can understand why. He's going to start for China tomorrow morning — missionary! It's the last of Pryor Gaines for us. I promised not to tell till he was gone. I've lied to him. That's all. But you'll not tell on me nor let him know. He says he's 'called.' And when a preacher gets that in his blood there's no stopping him."

At that moment Virginia Aydelot and a group of matrons came thronging out.

"Come in for the Virginia Reel," they demanded. "The young folks are having refreshments on the side porch and Bo Peep wants us to dance for him."

"May I have the honor?" Horace Carey said, bowing to Virginia Aydelot.

"With pleasure, Horace," Virginia replied with a smile.

As they led the way to the dining room, Dr. Carey said:

"I congratulate you tonight, Virginia, on your son, your kingly husband, and your busy, useful life. You've won the West, you two."

"Not yet," Virginia replied. "Not until our son proves himself. He's a farmer's boy now. Wait five years till he is the age his father was when he came out here. The test of victory is the second generation."

Bo Peep's fiddle began its song and the still young middle-aged guests with their host and hostess kept time to its rhythm.

CHAPTER XIV

The Second Generation

> The younger generation does not want instruction. It is perfectly willing to instruct if anyone will listen to it.
>
> —*The Education of Otis Yeere.*

THE second generation gave little thought to what was filling the minds of the first settlers tonight. The company was a large one and a dozen years later more than one young matron remembered Thaine Aydelot's birthday party as the beginning of a romance that ended happily for her.

"Jo, you are the queen of the ball tonight," Todd Stewart, Junior, declared, as he led her to the cool veranda after their fourth dance together.

Jo looked the part in the moonlight, as in the lamplight.

"Oh, no, I'm not. Leigh Shirley is Thaine's favorite, and his choice is queen tonight," Jo said coquettishly.

"Darn him! We all know who his choice is, all right," Todd said. "But, Jo, can't a fellow have half a chance, anyhow? You know, you can't help knowing a lot of us would fight for you."

He caught her hand in his and she did not resist at once.

"Oh, Jo, I know one fellow, anyhow—"

"Look at Thaine now," Jo interrupted him, as Thaine came near the open window. "Todd, do you know why he thinks so much of Leigh Shirley?"

"Of Leigh? Does he? I hope he does. He shows good

taste, anyhow. Everybody from Little Plum Creek clear to Northfork likes Leigh."

Jo's eyes flashed.

"She must be very popular."

"Oh, not as they like you, Jo. You must know the difference between you two, a real beauty and a sweet little girlie."

"She's not so sweet. She tries to attract and doesn't know how," Jo declared, for jealousy belongs to the dominant.

Todd Stewart's sense of justice was strong, even in his infatuation.

"Why, Jo, you mustn't be jealous of Leigh. She's the girl the boys can't make like them. She's the funniest, settest little creature. And yet, she is a cute child. But you are our pride, you know, and to me — well, let me take you home tonight, and I'll tell you about my pride."

"I don't care for your pride, if you all admire the cute child." Jo withdrew her hand from his. "Here comes Thaine now. I think you'd better take Leigh home. Thaine will take me, I'm sure. But I'll go to refreshments with you," she added, for she knew how to play on more than one string.

"Why, Josephine, my queen, my queen, where are you hiding? I've danced an extra, waiting for you. Todd Stewart, I'll have to kill you yet tonight. What do you mean by breaking up my party?"

Thaine caught Jo's arm and with a mock thrust at Todd he whirled her into the house.

"Did you really miss me?" Jo's big dark eyes were fastened on Thaine's face.

"More than tongue can tell. Who wouldn't miss you?" Thaine's eyes were shining mischievously.

"Leigh Shirley wouldn't," Jo said softly and half sadly.

Something impenetrable dropped before Thaine's face.

"Let's go out to the honeysuckle arbor and not dance now. I'm so tired," Jo murmured, with a sweet pleading in her voice.

"I fixed it just for you," Thaine declared as he led the way to the moonlit lawn and shadowy seat.

"You are so good to me, Thaine. What makes you do so many things just for me? I know you don't really care for me. You are so different from most farmers' sons." Jo's head drooped a little and she put one hand on his arm.

"I can't help being good to folks. It's just the angel in me," Thaine declared. Then he added seriously, "I wish I could do something for you, Jo. All the boys are wild about you tonight. You are a picture."

She was beautiful at the moment, and as she lifted her eyes to his something in their shining depths spoke witchingly to the youth of nineteen, untrained in ways of feminine coquetry. He was only a country boy, unskilled in social tactics, but a combination of timidity and good breeding shaped his ideals and his action.

"I don't care for all the boys," Jo murmured.

"Then we are hopelessly bankrupt," Thaine declared. "Isn't this a wonderful night?"

"Yes, and father and mother are going home so early," Jo said.

"Well, your whole wardrobe is over here; why not stay

all night? You can help Rosie and mother and me tomorrow. There are plenty of Benningtons left at your home without you, and mother will want you," Thaine urged.

"Do you want me to?" Jo asked softly.

"Tremendously. We'll eat all the ice cream that's left when the crowd goes and have the empty mansion all to ourselves," Thaine declared.

"We are to dance the last dance together too," Jo reminded him.

"Let's run in now. The crowd doesn't miss me, but I'm host, you know, and they're gasping for you. They'll be scouring the premises if we wait longer."

As Thaine lifted Jo to her feet there was a glitter of tears in her bright eyes. And because the place was shadowy and sweet with honeysuckle perfume, and the moonlight entrancing, and Jo was very willing, and tears are ever appealing, he put his arm around her and drew her close to him, and kissed her on each cheek.

Jo's face was triumphant as they met Leigh Shirley at the dining room door.

"What's the next case on docket, Leigh?" Thaine asked, dropping Jo's arm.

Jealousy has sharp eyes, but even jealousy could hardly have found fault with the friendly and indifferent look on Thaine's face.

"Why, it's my first with you, Leigh. Who's your partner, Jo?" Thaine continued.

Two or three young men claimed the honor, and the music began.

"Mrs. Aydelot, Thaine has asked me to stay all night," Jo said, as the figures were forming.

"It will please us all," Virginia said graciously, and Jo tripped away.

When the strains of music for the last dance began Jo looked for Thaine, but he was nowhere to be found. She waited impatiently and the angry glitter in her eyes was not unbecoming her imperious air.

Bo Peep did not wait long, for he was getting tired. Half a dozen young men rushed toward Jo as she stood alone. But Todd Stewart let no opportunity escape him. And the dance began. A minute later Thaine came in with Leigh Shirley. Smiling a challenge at Todd, he caught Leigh's hand and swung into the crowd on the floor.

The older guests were already gone. The music trailed off into a weird, rippling rhythm, with young hearts beating time to its melody and young feet keeping step to its measure. Then the tired, happy company broke into groups. Good-bys and good wishes were given again and again, and the party was over.

The couples took their way up or down the old Grass River trail or out across the prairie by-roads, with the moon sailing serenely down the west. Everybody voted it the finest party ever given on Grass River. And nobody at all, except his mother and Jo Bennington, noticed that Thaine had not left Leigh Shirley's side from his first dance with her late in the evening until the time of the good-bys.

As the guests were leaving Thaine turned to Jo, saying:

"I'm sorry about that last dance, but I'll forgive Todd this last time. Rosie cut her hand on a glass tumbler she dropped and I was helping Leigh to tie it up when old

Bo Peep started the music. Here's the girl I'm to take home. Got your draperies on already. The carriage waits and the black steed paws for us by the chicken yard gate. Goodnight, gentle beings." And taking Leigh's arm, he led her away.

"Gimpke is as awkward as a cow," Jo Bennington declared, "and too stupid to know what's said to her."

But Rosie Gimpke, standing in the shadows of the darkened dining room, was not too stupid to understand what was said about her. And into her stolid brain came dreams that night of a fair face with soft golden brown hair and kindly eyes of deep, tender blue. Stupid as she was, the woman's instinct in her told her in her dreams that the handsome young son of her employer might not always look his thoughts nor dance earliest and oftenest with the girl he liked best. But Rosie was dull and slept heavily and these things came to her sluggish brain only in fleeting dreams.

Thaine and Leigh did not hurry on their homeward way. And Jo Bennington, wide awake in the guest room of the Aydelot house, noted that the moon was far toward the west when Thaine let himself in at the side door and slipped up stairs unheard by all the household except herself.

"Let's go down by the lake," Thaine suggested as he and Leigh came to the edge of the grove. "It's full to the bridge, and the lilies are wide open now. Are you too sleepy to look at them? You used to draw them with chalk all along the blackboard in the old schoolhouse up there."

"I'm never too sleepy to look at water lilies in the

moonlight," Leigh replied, "nor too tired to paint them, either. Lilies are a part of my creed. 'Consider the lilies, how they grow.'"

"With their long rubbery stems, up out of mud mostly," Thaine said carelessly. "I pretty nearly grew fast along with them down there, till I learned how to gather them a better way."

The woodland shadows were thrust through with shafts of white moonbeams, giving a weird setting to the silent midnight hour. The odor of woods' blossoms came with the moist, fresh breath of the May night. There was a little song of waters gurgling down the spillway that was once only a dry draw choked with wild plum bushes. The road wound picturesquely through the grove to a bridged driveway that separated the lakelet into two parts. A spread of silvery light lay on this driveway and Thaine checked his horse in the midst of it while the two looked at the waters.

"It's all just silver or sable. There's no middle tone," Leigh said, looking at the sparkling moonbeams reflected on the face of the lake and the darkness of the shadowed surface beyond them.

"Isn't there pink, or creamy, or something softer in those lilies right by the bank? I'm no artist, but that's how it looks to a clod-hopper," Thaine declared.

"You are an artist, or you wouldn't catch that, where most anybody would see only steely white and dead black. It is the only color in this black and white woodsy place," Leigh insisted, looking up at Thaine's face in the shadow and down at her own white dress.

"There's a bit of color in your cheeks," Thaine said,

as he studied the girl's fair countenance, all pink and white in the moonlight.

"Oh, not the pretty blooming roses like Jo Bennington has," Leigh said, smiling frankly and folding her hands contentedly in her lap.

Thaine recalled the seat under the honeysuckle, and Jo Bennington's pleading eyes, and bewitching beauty, and the touch of her hand on his arm, and her willingness to be kissed. He was flattered by it all, for Jo was the belle of the valley, and Thaine thought himself in love with her. He knew that the other boys, especially Todd Stewart, Jr., envied him. And yet in this quiet hour in the silent grove, with the waters shimmering below them, the gentle dignity of the sweet-faced girl beside him, with her purity and simplicity wrapping her about, as the morning mists wrapped the far purple notches on the southwest horizon, gave to her presence there an influence he could not understand.

Thaine had never kissed any girl except Jo, had never cared enough for any other girl to think about it. But tonight there suddenly swept through his mind the thought of the joy that was waiting for some man to whom Leigh would give that privilege, and without any self-analysis (boys at nineteen analyze little) he began to hate the man who should come sometime to claim the privilege.

"Leigh, don't you ever feel jealous of Jo?" He didn't know why he asked the question.

Leigh gave a little laugh.

"Ought I?" she inquired, looking up. "She hasn't anything I want."

The deep violet eyes under the long lashes were beau-

tiful without the flashing and sparkle of Jo Bennington's coquettish gaze.

"That was an idiotic thing to ask," Thaine admitted. "Why should you, sure enough?"

"I wish I had some of those lilies." Leigh changed the subject abruptly.

"Hold the horse, then, and I'll get them. I keep a hooked knife on a long stick hidden down here on purpose to cut them for me mummy, on occasion."

Thaine jumped out of the buggy and ran down to the end of the driveway where the creamy lilies lay on the dark waters near the bank.

"Be careful of your dress," he said, as he came back and handed a bunch of blossoms with their trailing wet stems up to Leigh. "Do you remember your Prince Quippi off in China, and your love letters, with old Grass River for postal service? Will you send me a letter down the old Kaw River when I go to the Kansas University this fall?"

"A sunflower letter like I used to send to Quippi?" Leigh asked.

"Any kind of a letter. I'll miss you more than anything here, except my beloved chores about the farm," Thaine responded.

"Jo will write all the letters you'll have time to answer," Leigh asserted.

"Oh, she says she's going to Lawrence too, if her pa-paw is elected County Treasurer. We'll be in the University together. You'll just have to write to me, Leighlie."

"Not unless you go to China. I'll send you a letter

there like I used to send to Prince Quippi." There was a sudden pathos in her tone.

"Will you? Oh, Leigh, will you?" Thaine asked, gaily, looking down into her face, white and dainty in the soft light. "Quippi never answered one of them, but I would if I was over there, and I may go yet. There's no telling."

Leigh looked up with her eyes full of pain.

"Why, I didn't mean to tease you," Thaine declared.

"Thaine, Pryor Gaines is to start to China tomorrow. He's been planning it for weeks and weeks. He's going to be a missionary and he'll never come back again — and — and there is so much for me to do when he is gone. He has been such a kind helper all these years. His refined taste has meant so much to me in the study of painting, and I need him now."

Thaine gave a low whistle of surprise. Leigh's eyes were full of tears, but Thaine would not have dared to take her in his arms, as he had taken Jo Bennington.

"Little neighbor, we've been playmates nearly all our lives. Can't I help you in some way?" he asked gently.

"Yes, you can," Leigh replied in a low voice. "There are some things I must do for Uncle Jim and when you are doing *for* people you can't tell them nor depend on their advice. When Pryor is gone, may I ask you sometimes what to do? I won't bother you often."

Asher Aydelot had declared that Alice Leigh was the prettiest girl in Ohio in her day.

The pink-tinted creamy lilies looking up from the still surface of the lakelet were not so fair as the pink-tinted face of Alice Leigh's daughter, framed in the soft brown shadows of her hair with a hint of gold in the ripples at

the white temples. And behind the face, looking out through long-lashed violet eyes, was loving sacrifice and utter self-forgetfulness.

Thaine was nineteen and wise to give advice. A sudden thrill caught his pulse, mid-beat.

"Is that all? Can't I *do* something?" he asked eagerly.

"That's a great deal. And nobody can *do* for anybody. We have to *do* for ourselves."

"You are not doing anything for Uncle Jim, then, I am to understand," Thaine said.

But Leigh ignored his thrust, saying:

"When Pryor leaves, he doesn't want to say good-by to anybody, not even to Uncle Jim. He says China is only a little way off, just behind the purple notches over there. I'm going to take him to the train tomorrow and then I'm going on to Wykerton on business. After that, I may need lots of advice."

"Wykerton's a joint-ridden place, but John Jacobs has put a good class of farmers around it. He's such an old saloon hater, Hans Wyker'd like to kill him. But say, why not tell me now what you are about, so I can be looking up references and former judicial decisions handed down in similar cases?" Thaine asked lightly.

"Because it's too long a story, and I must get Pryor to the eight o'clock limited," Leigh said.

The crowing of chickens in a far away farmyard came faintly at that moment, and Thaine with a strange new sense of the importance of living, sent the black horses cantering down the trail to the old Cloverdale Ranch house.

Jo Bennington slept late. She had been up late. She had danced often and she had waited for Thaine's home-

coming. Yet, when she came downstairs in a white morning dress all sprinkled with little pink sprays, there was hardly a hint of weariness in her young face or in her quick footsteps.

"I'm glad you stayed, Jo," Mrs. Aydelot greeted her. "This is 'the morning after the night before,' and, as usual, the desertions equal the wounded and imprisoned. Asher and the men had to go across the river early to look after the fences and washouts on the lower quarter. And Rosie Gimpke decided to go home this morning as soon as breakfast was done. So it is left for us to get the house over the party. Not so easy as getting ready for it, especially without help."

"Where's Thaine?" Jo asked carelessly, though her face was a tattler.

"He took some colts over to John Jacobs' ranch. He had Rosie ride one and he rode another and led two. They were a sight. I hoped you might see them go by your window. Thaine had his hat stuck on like a Dutchman's and he puffed himself out and made up a regular Wyker face as he jogged along. And Rosie plumped herself down on that capering colt as though she shifted all responsibility for accidents upon it. The more it pranced about, the firmer she sat and the less concerned she was. I heard Thaine calling out, 'Breakers ahead!' as he watched her bring it back into the road in front of him with a sort of side kick of her foot."

"What made Gimpke leave?" Jo asked, to cover her disappointment.

"She cut her hand badly last night. She insisted at first that she would help me today and go home later to stay

till it gets well. Then she suddenly changed her mind. Possibly it was the spare-room bed," Virginia said laughing. "When I told her not to wake you when she made up the other beds, she suddenly got homesick, her hand grew worse and she flew the premises. I'll run up and attend to that bed while you finish your breakfast," and Virginia left the room.

At that moment young Todd Stewart appeared on the side porch before the dining room door.

"Thaine stopped long enough to ask me to come over and move furniture for his mother," Todd sang out. "He doesn't think you were made to lift cupboards and carry chairs downstairs."

"Oh, it's his mother he's thinking about," Jo said with pretty petulance. In truth, she was angry with Thaine for taking Leigh home last night and for leaving home today.

"No, it's his mother he's ceased to love," Todd said, coming inside. "He said he'd quit the old home and was moving his goods up to Wolf Creek for keeps. And with that fat tow-headed Gimpke girl sitting on the frisky bay colt as unconcerned as a bump on a log, it was the funniest sight I ever saw."

Jo tossed her head contemptuously.

"Say, Curly Locks, Curly Locks, you ought to always sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam and wear a dress to breakfast with those little pink du-dads scattered over it."

"Not if I was a farmer's wife," Jo responded quickly.

"Oh, Jo, do you really want to be a city girl?" Todd's face was frankly sorrowful. "Could you never be satisfied on a farm?"

"I don't believe I ever could," Jo said prettily.

"Thaine's a farmer all right, Jo."

"He isn't going to be one always," Jo broke in quickly. "He's going to the Kansas University and there's no telling after that."

"No, he's just going to Wykerton, that's all. Nay, he have went. Him and him fraulein. And say, there's another pretty fraulein went up the trail just ahead of the Aydelot horse party. A sweetheart of a girl whom Thaine Aydelot took home after all last night."

"I don't care where Thaine goes," Jo cried.

"And you don't care for a farmer anyhow," Todd said suavely.

"Oh, that depends on how helpful he is," Jo responded tactfully.

Todd sprang up and began to fling the chairs about with extravagant energy in his pretense of being useful.

"Let's help Mrs. Aydelot as swift as possible. It's hot as the dickens this morning, and the prognostics are for a cyclone before twelve hours. It's nearly eleven of 'em now. I'll take you home when we are through. Thaine isn't the whole of Grass River and the adjacent creeks and tributaries and all that in them is."

CHAPTER XV

The Coburn Book

And I see, from my higher level,
It is not the path but the pace
That wearies the back, and dims the eye,
And writes the lines on the face.
—Margaret E. Sangster.

MEANWHILE the May sunshine beat hot upon the green prairie, and the promised storm gathered itself together behind the horizon where the three headlands were lost in an ash-colored blur. Wykerton, shut in by the broken country about Big Wolf Creek, was more uncomfortable than the open prairie. And especially was it uncomfortable in the "blind tiger" of the Wyker eating-house.

Today the men of the old firm of Champers & Co. were again holding a meeting in this little room that could have told of much lawless plotting if walls could only tell.

"It's danged hot in here, Wyker. Open that window," Darley Champers complained. "What kept you fellows so long, anyhow?"

"Business kep' me, and Smith here, he stop to peek at a pretty girl for goot as ten minute," Hans Wyker said jocosely.

Champers stared at Thomas Smith, whose small eyes gleamed back at him.

"Oh, I just turned to look at Miss Shirley in the dining room. Can't a man look at a pretty girl if he is past forty-five? She didn't see me, though."

"Naw, she see nopotty but young Aytelot sitting mit her. Why you take oop precious time peekin' trough der crack in der kitchen door? I be back in a minute vonce. Smitt haf business mit you," Wyker declared as he turned to the kitchen again.

Left together, the two men sat silent a moment. Then Champers said with a frown:

"What do you want now? We've got no business with each other except as I am agent for your rents and mortgages."

"You seem to fatten on them, or something," Smith answered insinuatingly. "You lose no flesh with the years, I see."

"I've little occasion to worry," Darley Champers replied meaningly.

"Not with a fat income like yours and small returns to your employer who's kept you all these years," Smith began, but Darley Champers mentally blew up. It was in the bluffer's game that he always succeeded best.

"Now, see here, dang you. Get to business. You and Wyker and me dissolved partnership long ago. I've been your agent years and years. I've did my best. I never got so rich you could notice it on my breath. I'm not a thief nor a murderer. I keep inside the law. I broke with you fellows years ago, except straight contract that'll probate in any court. You are a bully in power and a coward out of it. What the devil do you want with me? I'm no bank. Be clear and quick about it and quit your infernal dodgin' human beins like a cut-throat. I've signed your name to no end of papers for you when you wouldn't put your own left-handed writin' in sight. I have

your written permit safe for doin' it. I reckon somebody must a' put that right hand of yours out of commission sometime. I'll find out about it one of these days myself."

Thomas Smith sat looking at the speaker with steady gaze. Many lines crossed his countenance now, but the crooked scar had not faded with time. In a coffin his would be the face of an old man. Alive, it was so colorless and uninteresting in expression that not one person in a hundred would turn to take a second look at him nor dream of the orgies of dissipation his years could recount. Withal, he had the shabby, run-down appearance as of a man in hard lines financially.

"I want money and I want it quick, or I'd not come clear out here. And you are going to get it for me. That Cloverdale quarter I've held grown to weeds so long you will sell to the first buyer now. Jim Shirley's at the last of his string. I did what I wanted to do with him. He'll never own a quarter again," Smith spoke composedly.

"Yes, I guess you're right. You've done him to his ruin. Jacobs has a mortgage on his home, too, and a Jew's a Jew. He'll close on Jim with a snap yet. It won't be the first time he's done it," Darley Champers declared.

"And that niece, Tank's girl, he was to protect for Alice Leigh?" Smith asked.

"Oh, eventually she'll either marry some hired man, I reckon, or go to sewin' or something like it for a livin'. She's a danged pretty girl now, but girls fade quick," Champers said.

For just one instant something like remorse swept Smith's face. Then he hardened again as the ruling passion asserted itself.

"Serves her right," he said in a tone so brutal that Champers remembered it.

"But I tell you I must have money. Two hundred dollars tonight and fourteen hundred inside of two weeks. And you'll get it for me. You understand that. And listen, now." Smith's voice slowly uncoiled itself to Champers' senses as a snake moves leisurely toward a bird it means to draw to itself. "You say you have signed my name for me and transacted business, handling my money. If you care to air the thing in court, I'm ready for you any time. But do you dare? Well, bring me two hundred dollars before tomorrow and the other fourteen hundred inside of two weeks. And after this look out for yourself."

The threat in the last words was indescribable, and Champers would have shuddered could he have seen Smith's countenance as he left the room.

"So he taunts me with being a coward and a brute, a thief and a cut-throat; dares to strike me in the face when I've given him a living so long he's forgotten who did it. I'm done with him. But he don't dare to say a word."

He shut his lips tightly and slowly clinched his hands.

"For wy you stare so at dat door yet? Where's Champers?" Hans Wyker demanded as he came in.

"The game's between us two now," Thomas Smith declared, turning to Hans Wyker.

And a grim game was plotted then and there. Hans, who had been a perpetual law-breaker since the loss of his brewery business, had let his hatred of John Jacobs grow to a virulent poison in his system. While Thomas Smith, whose character Darley Champers had read truly, followed so many wrong paths down the years that conscience and

manhood were strangers to him. From being a financier he had dropped to the employment of a brewers' association. His commission was to tempt young men and boys to drink; to create appetites that should build up the brewing business for the future. In the game now, Smith was to deliver beer and whisky into Wyker's hands. Wyker would do the rest. Whoever opposed him must suffer for his rashness.

It was cooler in the large dining-room where Thaine Aydelot and Leigh Shirley had met by chance at noontime. Leigh's face wore a deeper bloom and her eyes were shining with the exciting events of the day: the going of Pryor Gaines and the business that had brought her to Wykerton. Something like pain stabbed suddenly into Thaine Aydelot's mind as he caught sight of her, a surprise to find how daintily attractive she was in her cool summer gown of pale blue gingham and her becoming hat with its broad brim above her brown-gold hair.

"I didn't expect to find you here," Leigh said as Thaine took the chair opposite her at the little table.

"I came over to Little Wolf with Rosie Gimpke and some other colts. Then I walked over here to catch a ride to Careyville, if I could," Thaine said carelessly.

"You can ride with me if you want to. I'll be going soon after dinner," Leigh suggested.

"Oh, I'll want to all right. It may be well to start early. It's so hot I expect there'll be a storm before night," Thaine suggested, wondering the while what Leigh's business in Wykerton might be.

Darley Champers was in a fever when he came from his conference with Thomas Smith. Smith had played large

sums into his hands in the first years of their partnership. Of late the sums had all gone the other way. But Champers was entangled enough to know that he must raise the money required, and the land was the only asset. Few things are more difficult to accomplish than to find a buyer for what must be sold.

At the office Leigh was waiting for him. "Mr. Champers, I am Leigh Shirley from the Cloverdale place on Grass River," she said, looking earnestly up at him.

Darley Champers was no ladies' man, but so far as in his coarse-grained nature lay, he was never knowingly rude to a woman, and Leigh's manner and presence made the atmosphere of his office comfortingly different from the place he had just quitted. The white lilac bush in the yard behind the office whose blossoms sent a faint odor through the rear door, seemed to double its fragrance.

"Sit down, madam. I'm pleased to meet you. Can I be of any service to you today?" he said with bluff cordiality.

"Yes, sir. I want to buy the quarter section lying southeast of us. It was the old Cloverdale Ranch once. It belongs to Champers & Co. now, the records show, and I want to get it. It was my Uncle Jim Shirley's first claim."

Darley Champers stared at the girl and said nothing.

"What do you ask for it?" Leigh inquired.

Still the real estate dealer was silent.

"Isn't it for sale? It is all weed-grown and hasn't been cultivated for years."

The tremor in the girl's voice reached the best spot in Darley Champers' trade-hardened heart.

"Lord, yes, it's for sale!" he broke out.

A sense of relief at this sudden opportunity, combined with the intense satisfaction of getting even with Thomas Smith, overwhelmed him. Smith would rave at the sale to a Shirley, yet this sale had been demanded. Champers had written Smith's name into too many documents to need the owner's handwriting in this transaction. Smith would leave town in the evening. The whole thing was easy enough. While Leigh waited, the real humaneness of which Champers so often boasted found its voice within him.

"I'll sell it for sixteen hundred dollars if I can get two hundred down today and the rest in cash inside of two weeks. But I must close the bargain today, you understand."

He had fully meant to make it seventeen hundred fifty dollars. It was the unknown humane thing in him that cut off his own commission.

"It's worth it," he said to himself. "Won't Thomas Smith, who's got no name to sign to a piece of paper, won't he just cuss when it's all did! It's worth my little loss just to get something dead on him. The tricky thief!"

"I'll take it," Leigh said, a strange light glowing in her eyes and a firm line settling about her red lips.

Champers couldn't realize an hour later how it was all done, nor why with such a poor bargain for himself he should feel such satisfaction as he saw Leigh Shirley and Thaine Aydelot driving down the road toward Little Wolf together. Neither could he understand why the perfume of white lilac blossoms from the bush in the back yard of his office should seem so sweet this morning. He was not a flower lover. But he felt the two hundred dollars of good

money in his pocket and chuckled as he forecasted the hour of Thomas Smith's discovery.

"This is a shadier road than the one I came over this morning," Leigh said as she and Thaine followed the old trail toward Little Wolf Creek.

"It's a little nearer, too, and you'll see by casting a glimpse westward that things are doing over Grass River way," Thaine replied.

Leigh saw that a sullen black cloud bank was heaving above the western horizon and felt the heated air of the May afternoon.

"I don't like storms when I'm away from home," she said.

"Are you afraid, like Jo Bennington? She has the terrors over them. We were out once when she nearly bankrupted everything, she was so scared."

Thaine recalled a stormy night when Jo had clung to his arm to the danger of both of them and the frightened horse he could hardly control.

"No, I'm not afraid. I just don't like being blown about. I am glad I happened to find you, to be blown about, too, if it's necessary," Leigh replied.

"'Happened' is a good word, Leigh. You happened on what I managed you should, else that long circus performance with Mademoiselle Rosella Gimpkello, famous bareback rider, had not been put on the sawdust this hot day."

"What are you saying, Thaine Aydelot?" Leigh asked.

"You said last night you were coming over here today and that after you had come you might need my advice. Me for the place where my advice is needed ever, on land

or water. Rosie's hand isn't fit to use yet. I knew that was a nasty glass cut, so I met her in the hall upstairs early this morning and persuaded her to come over today. It gave me the excuse I wanted—to get here by mere happening."

"And leave Mrs. Aydelot all the cleaning up to do. Humane son!" Leigh exclaimed.

"Oh, Jo stayed all night, and I stopped at Todd Stewart's place and persuaded him down to help mother and Jo. It wasn't hard work to get him persuaded, either."

"Aren't you jealous of Todd?" Leigh asked, with a demure curve of her lip.

"Ought I be? He hasn't anything I want," Thaine retorted.

"No, he's a farmer. Some folks don't like farmers."

"I don't blame them," Thaine said thoughtlessly. "I haven't much use for a farm myself. But Leigh, am I an unnecessary evil? I really turned 'Rory Rumpus' and 'rode a raw-boned racer' clear over here just to be ready to help you. I wish now I'd stayed home and dried the knives and forks and spoons for my mammie."

"Oh, Thaine, you are as good as—as alfalfa hay, and I need you more today than I ever did in my life before."

"And I want to help you more than anything. Don't be a still cat, Leighlie. Tell me what you are up to."

They had reached the steep hill beyond the Jacobs sheep range where the narrow road with what John Jacobs called "the scary little twist" wound down between high banks to a shadowy hollow leading out to the open trail by the willows along Big Wolf. At the break in the bank, opening a rough way down to the deep waters of Little Wolf, a

draught of cool air swept up refreshingly against their faces. Thaine flattened the buggy top under the shade of overhanging trees and held the horse to the spot to enjoy the delightful coolness. They had no such eerie picture to prejudice them against the place as the picture that haunted John Jacobs' mind here.

"I've bought a ranch, Thaine; the quarter section that Uncle Jim entered in 1870," Leigh said calmly.

"Alice Leigh Shirley, are you crazy?" Thaine exclaimed.

"No, I'm safe and sane. But that's why I need your advice," Leigh answered.

Something in the girl's appealing voice and perfect confidence of friendship, so unlike Jo Bennington's pouting demands and pretty coquetry, came as a revelation and a sense of loss to Thaine. For he loved Jo. He was sure of that, cock-sure.

"It's this way," Leigh went on, "you know how Uncle Jim lost everything in the boom except his honor. He's helped everybody who needed help, and everybody likes him, I guess."

"I never knew anybody who didn't," Thaine agreed.

"So many things, I needn't name them all, bad crops, bad faith on the part of others, bad luck and bad judgment and bad health, for all his size, have helped till he is ready to go hopeless, and Uncle Jim's only fifty-one. It's no time to quit till you're eighty in such a good old state as Kansas," Leigh asserted. "Only, big as he is, he's not a real strong man, and crumples down where small nervy men stand up."

"Well, lady landlord, how can I advise you? You are past advising. You have already bought," Thaine said.

"You can tell me how to pay for the ranch," Leigh declared calmly. "I bought of Darley Champers for sixteen hundred dollars. I paid two hundred down just now. I've been saving it two years; since I left the high school at Careyville. Butter and eggs and chickens and some other things." She hesitated, and a dainty pink tint swept her cheek.

Why should a girl be so deliciously fair with the bloom of summer on her cheeks and with little ringlets curling in baby-gold hair about her temples and at her neck, and with such red lips sweet to kiss, and then put about herself a faint invisible something that should make the young man beside her blush that he would even think of being so rude as to try to kiss her.

"And you paid how much?" Thaine asked gravely.

"Two hundred dollars. I want to borrow fourteen hundred more and get it clear away from Darley Champers. I'm sure with a ranch again, Uncle Jim will be able to win out," Leigh insisted.

"What's on it now?" Thaine asked.

"Just weeds and a million sunflowers. Enough to send Prince Quippi such a message he'd have to write back a real love letter to me," Leigh replied.

"Leighlie, you can't do it. You might pay interest maybe, year in and year out, the gnawing, wearing interest. That's all you'd do even with your hens and butter. Don't undertake the burden."

"I've already done it," Leigh declared.

"Throw it up. You can't make it," Thaine urged.

"I know I can," Leigh maintained stoutly.

"You can't."

"I can."

"How?" Thaine queried hopelessly.

"If I can get the loan—"

"Which you can't," Thaine broke in. "Any man on Grass River will tell you the same, if you don't want to believe the word of a nineteen-year-old boy."

"Thaine, I must do something. Even our home is mortgaged. Everything is slipping out from under us. You don't know what that means."

"My father and mother knew it over and over." Thaine's face was full of sympathy.

"And they won out. I'm not so foolish after all. When they came out here, they took the prairies as Nature had left them, grass-covered and waiting. I'm taking them as the boom left them, weed-covered and waiting. I'll earn the interest myself and make the land pay the principal and I know exactly how it will do it, too."

"Tell me how," Thaine demanded.

"It's no dream. I got the idea out of a Coburn book last winter," Leigh replied.

"You mean the State Agricultural Report of Secretary Coburn? Funny place to hunt for inspiration; queer gospel, I'd say," Thaine declared. "Why didn't you go to the census report of 1890, or Radway's Ready Relief Almanac, or the Unabridged Dictionary?"

"All right, you despiser of small things. It was just an agricultural report full of tables and statistics and comparative values and things that I happened on one day when things were looking blackest, and right in the middle I found a page that Foster Dwight Coburn must have put in just for me, I guess. There was a little sketch of an

alfalfa plant with its long good roots, and just one paragraph beside it with the title, 'The Silent Subsoiler.'"

"That sounds well," Thaine observed. He was listening eagerly in spite of his joking, and his mind was alert to the girl's project.

"Mr. Coburn said," Leigh went on, "that there are some silent subsoilers that do their work with ease and as effectually as any plow ever hitched, and the great one of these is alfalfa; that it is a reservoir of wealth that takes away the fear of protest and over-draft."

"Well, and what if Coburn is right?" Thaine queried.

"Listen, now. I planned how I'd get back that old claim of Uncle Jim's; how I'd pay some money down and borrow the rest, and begin seeding it to alfalfa. Then I'll churn and feed chickens and make little sketches of water lilies, maybe, and pay the interest and let the alfalfa pay off the principal. I haven't any father or mother, Thaine; Uncle Jim is all I have. He hasn't always been successful in business ventures, but he's always been honest. He has nothing to blush for, nothing to keep hidden. I know we'll win now, for that writing of Foster Dwight Coburn's is true. Don't try to discourage me, Thaine," she looked up with shining eyes.

"You are a silent little subsoiler yourself, Leigh, doing your work effectually. Of course you'll win, you brave girl. I wish it was a different kind of work, though."

A low peal of thunder rolled up from the darkening horizon, and the sun disappeared behind the advancing clouds.

"That's our notice to quit the premises. I shouldn't want to ford Little Wolf in a storm. It is ugly enough

any time and was bank full when I took Rosie Posie over this morning. And say, her mother's got a face like a brass bedstead."

Thaine was lifting the buggy top as he spoke. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"Oh, Leigh, look down yonder."

He pointed down the little rift toward the water.

"Where?" Leigh asked, looking in the direction of his hand.

"Across the creek, around by the side of that hill. That's the Gimpke home stuck in there where you'd never think of looking for a house from up here. They can see anybody that goes up this lonely hill and nobody can see them. If I was gunning for Gimpkes, I'd lie in wait right here," Thaine declared.

"Maybe, if the Gimpkes were gunning for you, they could pick you off as you went innocently up this Kyber Pass and you'd never know what hit you nor live to tell the tale; and they so snugly out of sight nobody but you would ever have sighted them," Leigh replied. "But let's hurry on. It will be cooler on the open prairie than down there along the creek trail. And if we are storm-stayed, we are storm-stayed, that's all."

"You are the comfortablest girl a fellow could have, Leighlie. You aren't a bit scared of storms like—"

"Yes, like Jo. I can't help it. I never was much of a 'fraid cat, but I don't mind admitting I am fonder of water in lakes and rivers and water-color drawings than thumping down on my head from the little end of a cyclone funnel."

The air grew cooler in their homeward ride, while they

followed the same old Sunflower Trail that Asher and Virginia Aydelot had followed one September day a quarter of a century before. And, for some reason, they did not stop to question, neither was eager to reach the end of the trail today.

As they came to a crest of the prairie looking down a long verdant slope toward what was now a woodsy draw, Thaine said, "Leigh, my mother was lost here somewhere once and Doctor Carey found her. Maybe Doctor Carey is the man to help you now."

"Oh, Thaine, I believe I could ask Doctor Carey for anything. You are so good to think of him," Leigh exclaimed. "I knew you'd help me out."

"Yes, I'm good. That's my trade," Thaine replied. "And I'm pretty brave to offer advice, too. But if you want to talk any about courage, mine's a different brand from yours. I may be a soldier myself some day. Brother Aydelot of the Sunflower Ranch, trustee of the Grass River M. E. Church, fit, bled, and died in the Civil War and was not quite my age now when he came out all battle-scoured and gory. I always said I'd be a soldier like my popper. But I'd fall in a dead faint before that alfalfa and mortgage business you face like a hero. It's getting cooler. See, the storm didn't get this side of the purple notches; it stayed over there with Pryor Gaines and Prince Quippi."

They rode awhile in silence, then Thaine said: "Leigh, I will go up to Careyville and send Doctor Carey down to Cloverdale to see you. It will save you some time at least, and I'll tell him you want to see him particularly and alone. You can tell me the result Sunday if you want to."

Leigh did not reply, but gratitude in the violet eyes made words unnecessary.

On the Sabbath after the party, Thaine Aydelot waited at the church door for Jo Bennington, who loitered out slowly, chatting the while with Todd Stewart.

"Let me take you home, Jo. I see your carriage will be full with the company you will have today," Thaine said.

Jo looked with a pretty pout at the invited guests gathered about her mother and father waiting for her at the family carriage.

"Thank you, yes. I am glad to get away from those tiresome goody-goodies. It looks like the Benningtons are taking the whole official board and the 'amen corner' home for dinner."

"Then come to the Sunflower Inn and dine with me. Rosie Gimpke came back last night and she promised me shortcake and sauerkraut and pretzels and schooners of Grass River water. Do come."

Indeed, Thaine had been most uncomfortable since the day at Wykerton, and he wanted to be especially good to Jo now. He didn't know exactly why, nor had he felt any jealousy at the bright looks and the leisure preference she had just given to Todd Stewart.

"Oh, you are too good. Yes, I'll go, of course," Jo exclaimed. "Can't we go down to the grove and see the lilies this afternoon, too?"

"Yes, we can go to China if we want to," Thaine declared. "Wait here in the shade until I drive up."

and much chatting of neighbors was everywhere. Jim Teams were being backed away from the hitching-rack,

Shirley was not at church today, and Jo saw Leigh Shirley going alone toward the farther end of the rack where her buggy stood, while three or four young men were rushing to untie her horse. Jo, turning to speak to some neighbors, did not notice who had outdistanced the others in this country church courtesy until she realized that the crowd was going, and down the deserted hitching line Leigh Shirley sat in her buggy talking with Thaine, who was standing beside it with his foot on the step, looking up earnestly into her face.

Jo was no better pleased that Leigh's face was like a fair picture under her white hat, and she felt her own cheeks flushing as she saw how cool and poised and unhurried her little neighbor appeared.

"Thank you, Thaine. All right. Don't forget, then," Jo heard her say as she gathered up the reins, and noted that it was her motion and not the young man's that cut short the interview.

"Leigh is a leech when she has the chance," Jo said jokingly, as the two sat in the Aydelot buggy at last.

When one has grown up from babyhood the ruling spirit in a neighborhood, her opinions are to be accepted.

Thaine gave Jo a quick look but said nothing.

"By the way, papa says Jim isn't very well this summer. Says he still grieves over the farm he lost. Leigh hasn't much ahead of her, nailed down to a chicken lot and a cow pasture and a garden. I wonder they don't move to town. She'd get a clerkship, maybe."

Thaine only waited, and Jo ran on.

"I'd never stay in the country a minute if I could get to town. I'll be glad when papa's elected treasurer, so we

can live in Careyville again. Poor Leigh. Doesn't she look like a drudge?"

Still Thaine was silent.

"Why don't you say something?" Jo demanded, looking coquettishly at him.

"About what?" he asked gravely.

"About Leigh. I don't want to do all the gossiping. Tell me what you think of her."

"It would take a Cyclopedia Britannica set of volumes to do that," Thaine replied.

"Oh, be serious and answer my questions," Jo demanded.

"'Doesn't she look like a drudge?'" What kind of an answer — information or just my opinion?"

"Oh, your opinion, of course," Jo said.

"If she looks like a drudge, it's what she is." The young man's eyes were on his team.

"I thought you liked her," Jo insisted.

"I do," Thaine replied.

"How much, pray?"

"I haven't measured yet."

Thaine Aydelot was by inheritance a handsome young fellow, and as he turned now to his companion, something in his countenance gave it a manliness not usual to his happy-go-lucky expression. But the same unpenetrable something beyond which no one could see was always on his face when Jo talked of Leigh.

"How much do you like me?" The query was daringly put, but the beauty of the girl's striking face seemed to warrant anything from her lips, however daring.

"A tremendous lot, I know that," Thaine replied

quickly, and Jo dropped her eyes and began to chatter of other things.

In the afternoon the cool grove was inviting, and Thaine and Jo loitered about in careless enjoyment of woodland shadows and wind-dimpled waters and Sabbath quiet and one another.

"I want father to have a little boathouse over by the lily corner and make a picnic place here sometime," Thaine said as they sat by the lake in the late afternoon.

"Such a nice place for you to come in the summer. Aren't you glad you don't just have to stay in the country?" Jo asked.

"Would you never be satisfied in the country, Jo?" Thaine queried. "Not if you had a home there?"

Jo blushed and her face was exquisite in its rich coloring.

"Would you be?" she asked.

"Oh, I'd like to do something worth while," Thaine replied. "Father doesn't say much, but he wants me here, I know."

"He will get over it, I'm sure," Jo insisted. "Why should the first generation here weight us all down here, too? I hope you'll not give up to your father. I wouldn't," Jo said defiantly.

"Did you ever give up to him?" Thaine asked.

"No, he gives up to me." The words were too sweetly said to seem harsh.

"I don't blame him," Thaine added.

"I don't believe any of our crowd will stay here like the old folks have done, except Todd Stewart and, of course, Leigh," Jo declared.

"Say, Jo, my folks don't look old to me. Mummie is younger and good-lookinger than anybody, except—"

"Leigh Shirley," Jo broke in.

Thaine looked at his watch without replying.

"Is it late? You must take me home, now," Jo said. "You'll be over tonight, won't you? We will have some company from Careyville who want to meet you."

"I'm sorry, but I promised Leigh up here at church that I'd go over to Cloverdale for a little while tonight."

Thaine could not tell Jo of Leigh's affairs, and he felt that the Shirleys' intimacy with his father's family and his own expressed admiration and attention to Jo were sufficient to protect him from jealousy. Jo stiffened visibly.

"Thaine Aydelot, what's the reason for your actions—Oh, I don't care. Go to Shirley's, by all means. Everybody to his likes," she cried angrily.

"Well, that's my rathers for tonight, and I can't help it," Thaine answered hotly.

"Of course you can't. Let's go home quick so you can get off early," Jo said in an angered tone.

"I'll go as slowly as I can. You can't get rid of me so." Thaine was getting control of himself again.

"Say, Thaine, tell me why you go away from our company tonight," Jo pleaded softly, putting her hand on her companion's arm. "Don't you care to come to our house any more?"

They were in the buggy now on the driveway across the lake. Thaine recalled the moonlight hour when he sat with Leigh, of how little Leigh seemed to be thinking of herself, of how he had admired her because she demanded no admiration from him. Was there an obligation demanded

here today? And had he given grounds for such obligation? Past question, he had.

"Jo, you must take me just as I am," he said. "All the boys are ready to crowd into any place I vacate around Cyrus Bennington's premises. You won't miss one from your company tonight. I may get desperate — and kill off a few of them sometime to make you really miss me."

He knew he was talking foolishly. He had felt himself superior to the other young men who obeyed every wish of Jo's. He had been flattered always by her evident preference for his company, and had not thought of himself as being controlled by her before. He had been too willing to do her bidding. Today, for the first time, her rule was irksome. In spite of his efforts to be agreeable, the drive homeward was not a happy one.

It was twilight when Thaine reached the Cloverdale Ranch and found Leigh waiting for him on the wide porch. All the way down the river he had been calling himself names and letting his conscience stab him unmercifully. And once when something spoke within him, saying, "You never told Jo you were fond of her. You have not done her any wrong," he stifled back the pleasing voice and despised himself for trying to find such excuse. He was only nineteen and had not had the stern discipline of war that Asher Aydelot had known at the same age.

Jo had offered no further complaint at his refusing her invitation. She played the vastly more effective part of being grieved but not angry, and her quiet good-by was so unlike pretty imperious Jo Bennington that Thaine was tempted to go back and spend the evening in her company. Yet, strangely enough, he did not blame Leigh for

being the cause of his discomfort, as he should have done. As he neared her home, his conscience grew less and less noisy, and when he sat at last in Jim Shirley's easy porch chair with Leigh in a low rocker facing him, while the long summer Sabbath twilight was falling on the peaceful landscape about him, he had almost forgotten Jo's claim on him.

"Doctor Carey came down to see me," Leigh was saying, "just as you were kind enough to ask him to do. He told me he had no money of his own to loan, but he knew of a fund he might control in a few days. He had to leave Kansas yesterday on a business trip, but he will see me as soon as he comes back."

"Better than gold! Your plans just fall together and fit in, don't they?" Thaine exclaimed. "Will he be back in time, though?"

"Yes. But really, Thaine," Leigh's eyes were beautiful in the twilight, "I never should have thought of Doctor Carey if it hadn't been for you."

"I am of some use to the community after all," Thaine said with serious face.

"You are a great deal of use to me," Leigh assured him.

"Oh, anybody else could do all I do for you," he retorted.

"But I wouldn't ask anybody else," the girl replied.

"Not even my mother? She thinks there is no girl like you this side of heaven, or Virginia, anyhow, and she'd have taken it up with father," Thaine declared.

"I thought of her," Leigh answered, "but in things like this, it is impossible. You said yourself that no man on Grass River would think it a wise plan. Your father won his fight out here, even his fight against the boom.

We have a different wilderness to overcome, I guess. Mine is reclaiming that Cloverdale ranch from the Champers Company and the weeds. I don't know where your battlefield lies, but you'll have it, and it's because you haven't won yet that I can come to you. You have helped me and you always will."

"I'm glad you came to me, anyhow," Thaine assured her.

They sat awhile looking out at the prairies and the line of the river glistening in the gloaming. A faint pink tone edged some gray cloud flakes in the southwest sky and all the scene was restful in the soft evening light.

At last Thaine said thoughtfully: "I haven't heard the bugle trumpet for my call to battle yet. Maybe I'll find out down at the University and make everybody proud of me some day as I am proud of you in your fight for a weed-covered quarter of prairie soil. Jo Bennington is always ridiculing country life, and yet she's pretty fond of Todd Stewart, who is more of a farmer every day."

A little smile curved the corners of Leigh's mouth, and Thaine knew her thoughts.

"You are not a bit alike, you two girls," he exclaimed.

"Does it make any difference? There's only one of a kind of anything in this world, flower or fruit or leaf or life," Leigh added. "I found that out in painting. There's only one Jo, and one Pryor Gaines, and one Jane Aydelot as I remember her back in Ohio; one anything or anybody."

"And only one Leigh in all the world."

It was not the usual bantering tone now, and there was something in the expression of Thaine's handsome face; something looking out from his dark eyes that Leigh did

not see, because she was looking out at the lights and shadows of evening.

The sunset's afterglow had thrown a splendor far up the sky. In its reflected light, softened by twilight shadows, Leigh made a picture herself that an artist might love to paint.

She turned away at his words, and a quiver of pain swept her face as Thaine leaned toward her eagerly.

"Oh, Leigh, I wasn't joking. You are so unlike anybody else. He broke off suddenly. But Leigh was herself again and, smiling frankly, she added, "Let's count our blessings, then, and be thankful it's no worse."

Thaine rose at once.

"I must be going. It is after eight and I ought to be at Bennington's now. I am so glad, I am so honored, to have your confidence. Won't you keep telling me your plans, and if I can help you, will you let me do it?"

He had taken Leigh's hand in good-by and held it as he put the question.

"I'll be so glad to have your help, for we will see things alike, not as the older people see for us. It is only at our age that we dare take risks. Your father and Uncle Jim wouldn't come to Kansas now if it were now like it was when they were twenty-one."

Thaine did not release her hand.

"I'm glad there is only one Leigh," he said softly.

The light of his eyes and the sympathetic tone seemed all unlike the heir of the Sunflower Ranch, yet very much like the spirit of the father who had wrested it from the wilderness, and the mother who had courageously shared his every need.

"I don't know tonight where my wilderness lies. But I hope, little girl, I hope I'll fight as good a battle on my frontier as my father has done — as you are doing. Good-night."

He hurried away and, falling into the gay company at Bennington's, was welcomed by Jo as a penitent, and abundantly forgiven.

While down at Cloverdale, Leigh Shirley sat long alone, looking with unseeing eyes at the twilight into which he had vanished.

CHAPTER XVI

The Humaneness of Champers

What is the use of trying to make things worse?
Let's find things to do, and forget things.
—*The Light That Failed.*

ON the third day after Darley Champers had closed with Leigh Shirley, Horace Carey walked into his office.

"Hello, Champers, how's business?" he asked, with the cheerful way that drew even his enemies to him.

"Danged bad!" Champers replied. "Rotten world is full of danged fools who want money and ain't satisfied when you get it for 'em."

"Have you made such a sale lately?" Carey inquired.

"Yes; day before yesterday," Champers replied.

"Was it the old Jim Shirley quarter, the Cloverdale Ranch?" the doctor asked.

"The very place, and I'm in a devil of a fix, too," Darley Champers declared. "The trouble is I'm dead sure I'll not get the other fourteen hundred."

Thomas Smith had been paid the two hundred dollars and had fully released the land to Champers to finish the sale. Unfortunately for Champers, Smith still hung about Wykerton, annoying his agent so much that in a fit of anger, Champers revealed the fact that Leigh Shirley was the buyer of the Cloverdale Ranch. Smith's rage was the greater because he did not believe the price money could be paid by a girl without resources, and against this girl

he was not now ready to move. The burden of the whole matter now was that Darley Champers had taken his life in his own hands by the deal. The bulldog in Champers was roused now, and, while he was a good many things evil, he was not a coward.

But for his anger this morning, he would hardly have been so free in answering Doctor Carey's query. Carey was a living rebuke to him, and no man loves that force anywhere.

"I tell you, I'm in a devil of a fix," he repeated.

"Well, be wise and go to a doctor in time," Doctor Carey said, only half in jest. "Champers, we haven't always worked together out here, but I guess we know each other pretty well. I'm willing to trust you. Are you afraid to trust me?"

Darley Champers leaned back in his office chair and stared at the questioner.

Horace Carey's heavy hair was very white now, although he was hardly fifty-five years old. The decades of consecrated service to his profession had told only in this one feature. His face was the face of a vigorous man, and something in his life, maybe the meaning of giving up and the meaning of the service, he once told Jim Shirley, he had known, had left upon his countenance their mark of strength. As Darley Champers looked at this face, he realized, as he had never done before, the freedom and joy of an unsullied reputation and honest dealing.

"Lord, no, I'd trust you in hell, Doc," he exclaimed bluntly.

"I won't put it to the proof," the doctor assured him. "Nor will I trouble you nor myself with any matter not

concerning us two. Tell me frankly all the trouble about this sale."

Briefly, Champers explained Smith's hatred of Jim Shirley, and his anger at the present sale.

"All I ask is that you will not break your word to Miss Shirley," Horace Carey said. "I happen to know that the money will be ready for you. This Smith is the same man who came to old Carey's Crossing years ago, of course?"

"Why, do you remember him?" Darley Champers asked in surprise.

"I've crossed his trail a hundred times since then, and it's always an ill-smelling trail. Some day I may follow it a bit myself. You'll do well to break with him," the doctor assured him.

"If Doc Carey ever starts on that hyena's trail, I'd like to be in at the end of the chase," Champers declared with a grin.

"Why not help a bit yourself? I'm going East for a week. When I come back, I'll see you. Maybe I can help you a little to get his claws unhooked from your throat," Carey suggested, and the two men shook hands and separated.

Champers stood up and breathed deeply. The influence of an upright man's presence is inspiring. Horace Carey did not dream that his confidence and good will that day were turning the balances for Darley Champers for the remainder of his life. Champers was by nature a ferret, and Carey's parting words took root and grew in his mind.

The May rains that had flooded Grass River and its tributaries did worse for Clover Creek in Ohio a few days

later. The lower part of the town of Cloverdale was uncomfortably submerged until the high railroad grade across the creek on the Aydelot farm broke and let the back water have broader outlet.

Doctor Carey had not startled the same old loafers who kept watch over the railway station when he suddenly dropped into the town again. They were too busy watching the capers of Clover Creek to attend to their regular post of duty. And since he had been a guest of Miss Jane Aydelot as much as a half dozen times in two decades, they knew about what to expect of him now.

They were more interested in a big bluff stranger who dropped into town off the early morning train, ate a plentiful meal at the depot restaurant, and then strolled down to the creek. He loitered all day about the spot where the grade broke, nor did he leave the place when the crowd was called away late in the afternoon to a little stream on the other side of town that had suddenly risen to be a river for the first time in the memory of man.

To Doctor Carey, Jane Aydelot looked scarce a day older for the dozen years gone by. Her days were serene and full of good works. Such women do not lose the charm of youth until late in life.

"I have come for help, as you told me to do when I took Leigh away," Doctor Carey said as they sat on the south veranda in the pleasant light of the May evening.

Jane Aydelot's face was expectant. Nobody except Doctor Carey knew how a little hungry longing in her eyes disappeared when he made his brief visits and crept back again when he said goodby.

"I am waiting always to help you," she replied.

"I need fourteen hundred dollars to loan to Leigh, and I must have that sum at once."

Miss Jane looked thoughtfully at the deep woodland, hiding the marshes as of old.

"I can arrange it," she said presently. "Tell me about it."

And Horace Carey told her all of Leigh's plans.

"It is a wonderful undertaking for a girl, but she has faith in herself, and if she fails, the land is abundantly worth the mortgage with nothing but weeds on it," the doctor explained. "She is a charming girl. She seems to have inherited all of her mother's sweetness and artistic gifts, without her mother's submissiveness to others; and from her father, she has keen business qualities, but fails to inherit his love of gain and traits of trickery. Her executive mind with her uncle's good heart make a winning team. By the way, my affection for Jim Shirley is leading me to make some quiet investigation of an agent of Tank's who is hounding Jim and will, I suppose, turn against Leigh. Can you help me at all?"

Doctor Carey had always felt that Miss Jane knew much more than she cared to tell of the Shirley family's affairs.

She rose without replying and went into the house. In a few minutes she returned and gave a large sealed envelope into Doctor Carey's hands.

"Do not use that until it is needed to protect someone from Tank Shirley's violence. It is legally drawn and witnessed. You will find it effective if it is needed at all."

"I have one more duty, Miss Aydelot," Doctor Carey said. "My time is brief. I have an intuition, too, that I may never come East again."

Jane Aydelot's face whitened, and her hands closed involuntarily on one another as she waited.

"I must have you and Asher Aydelot reconciled. What can I tell him of you?"

The pink flush returned to the pale cheeks.

"Let him read my will. I copied it when I had your telegram two days ago. I cannot give him my property; Uncle Francis' will forbids it. But—take the copy with you. I hope my wishes will be realized."

Doctor Carey held her hand long when he bade her good-by. In her clear gray eyes he read a story that gave him infinite sorrow. Stooping down, he put his arm gently about her shoulders and, drawing her to him, kissed her once on her forehead, and once—just once—on her lips, and was gone.

They never met again. But those who knew her best in Cloverdale remember yet that from the Maytime of that year, Miss Jane's face was glorified with a light never there before.

Down at the creek, Doctor Carey saw a large man intently studying the bank beyond the break in the railroad grade. Something made the doctor pass slowly, for the figure appealed to his interest. Presently, the man turned away and, climbing up to the National pike road before him, made his way into town. As the last light of evening fell full upon him, it revealed to Doctor Carey a very white face, and eyes that stared, as if seeing nothing—even the bluff face and huge form of Darley Champers.

Two weeks later when Darley Champers gave Leigh Shirley the deed in her own name to the Cloverdale Ranch, he said, in his bluff way:

"I'm sayin' nothin' against Jim Shirley, madam, when I say I hope you'll keep this in your own name. Some day you'll know why. And I hope to Gawd you'll prosper with it. It's cost more'n the money paid out for it to get that quarter section of prairie out of the wilderness. Sorrow and disappointment, bad management, and blasted hopes, and hard work, and hate. But I reckon it's clean hands and a pure heart, as the Good Book says, that you are usin' now. This money don't represent all it'll cost me yet by a danged sight."

He bade her a hearty good-by and strode away.

The mortgage for the loan was given to Horace Carey, as agreed upon between himself and Miss Jane Aydelot.

"If Leigh knows it's Aydelot money she might feel like she's taking what should be Thaine's. Would the Aydelots feel the same if they knew it?" Miss Jane had asked.

"The thing the Aydelots have never grieved for is this Ohio inheritance," Carey answered her. "Asher gave it up to live his life in his own way. If you knew what a prince of a fellow he is, although he's only a Kansas farmer, you would understand how that prairie ranch and the lure of the sunflower have gripped him to the West."

The day after the completion of the sale Dr. Carey went to the Big Wolf neighborhood. In the dusk of the evening he drove up to Darley Champers' office in Wykerton. As he was hitching his team Rosie Gimpke rushed out of the side street and lunged across to the hitching post.

"Oh, Doctor Carey, coom queek mit me," she exclaimed in a whisper. "Coom, I just got here from Mis' Aydelot's.

They mak' me coom home to work at the Wyker House, ant a man get hurt bad in there. Coom, do coom," she urged in a frenzy of eagerness.

"What's the trouble?" Dr. Carey asked.

"Coom. I show you. I 'fraid the man coom back and finish heem. Don't make no noise, but coom." Rosie was clutching hard at Dr. Carey's arm as she whispered.

"That sounds surprising, but life is full of surprises," the doctor thought as he took up his medicine case and followed Rosie's lead.

The way took them to the alley behind the Wyker House, through a rear gate to the back door of the kitchen, from which it was a short step to the little "blind tiger" beyond the dining room. Sounds of boisterous talking and laughter and a general shuffling of dishes told that the evening meal was beginning. For her size and clumsiness Rosie whisked the doctor deftly out of sight and joined the ranks of the waiters in the dining room.

The only light inside the little room came from the upper half of the one window looking toward the alley. As it was already twilight the doctor did not get his bearings until a huge form on the floor near the table made an effort to rise.

"What's the trouble here?" Carey asked in the sympathetic-professional voice by which he controlled sick rooms.

"Lord, Doc, is that you?" Darley Champers followed the words with a groan.

"You are in a fix," Carey replied as he lifted Champers to his feet.

Blood was on his face and clothes and the floor, and Champers himself was almost too weak to stand.

"Get me out of here as quick as you can, Doc," he said in a thick voice.

At the same moment Rosie Gimpke appeared from the kitchen.

"Slip him out queek now. I hold the dining room door tight," she urged, rushing back to the kitchen.

Carey moved quickly and had Darley Champers safely out and into his own office before Rosie had need to relax her grip on the dining room door-knob.

"I guess you've saved me," Champers said faintly as the doctor examined his wounds.

"Not as bad as that," Dr. Carey replied cheerfully. "An ugly scalp wound and loss of blood, but you'll come back all right."

"And a kick in the abdomen," Champers groaned. "But it was from what was comin' you saved me. I've never been sick a day in my life and I've had little sympathy for you and your line, and then to be knocked down so quick by a little whiffet like Smith and roll over like a log at the first blow!"

"You're in luck. Most men in your line ought to have been knocked down a good many times before now," the doctor declared. "How did this happen?"

"I settled with Smith and made him sign everything up to a hog-tight contract. Then he started in to abuse me till I got tired and told him I'd just got back from Ohio and a thing or two I saw there. Then he suddenly belted me and, against all rules of the game, kicked me when I was down, and left me, threatening to come back and finish me. That's what you saved me from."

"Champers, my old buggy is like a rocking chair. Let

me take you home with me for a few days while you are wearing patches on your head," Horace Carey suggested.

Darley Champers stared at his helper in surprise. Then he said slowly:

"Say, Doc, I've hated you a good many years for doin' just such tricks for folks. It was my cussedness made me do it, I reckon. I'd like to get out of town a little while. That joint of Wyker's has seen more'n one fellow laid out, and some of 'em went down Big Wolf later, and some of 'em fell into Little Wolf and never come out. It's a hole, I tell you. And Smith is a devil tonight."

On the homeward way Dr. Carey said quietly:

"By the way, Champers, I saw you at Cloverdale, Ohio, last week."

Champers did not start nor seem surprised as he replied:

"Yes, I seen you, but I didn't want to speak to nobody right then."

"No?" Dr. Carey questioned.

"No. I've got hold enough of Smith now to make him afraid of me if I'd turn loose. I'd a made money by doin' it, too. Good clean money. That's why he's gettin' good and drunk to beat me up again tonight, maybe."

"Well, why don't you tighten up on him? Why let a scoundrel like that run free?" Carey inquired.

"Because it might drag Leigh Shirley's name into the muss. And I'm no devourer of widders and orphans; I'm a humane man, and I'll let Smith run till his tether snaps and he falls over the precipice and breaks his neck for hisself. Besides I'm not sure now whether he's a agent, representin' some principal, or the principal representin'

hisself. And in that case I'd have to deal the cards different for him, and them he'd do harm to."

"You are a humane man, Champers," Carey declared. "I think I've hated you, too, a good many years. These gray hairs of ours ought to make us better behaved now. But, even if you do let Smith run, that 'blind tiger' of Wyker's must go out of business. I'll start John Jacobs after that hole one of these days. He holds the balance of power on public sentiment out here. He'll clear it out. His hatred of saloons is like Smith's hatred of Shirley, only it's a righteous indignation. I've heard John's father was a drunkard and his mother followed her husband into a saloon in Cincinnati to persuade him out and was killed by a drunken tough. Anyhow, John will break up that game of Wyker's one of these times. See if he doesn't."

Darley Champers slowly shifted his huge frame into an easier posture as he replied:

"Yes, he can do it all right. But mark me, now, the day he runs Hans Wyker out of that doggery business it will be goodby to John Jacobs. You see if it isn't. I wouldn't start him after it too quick."

Darley Champers spent two weeks with his physician, and the many friends of Dr. Carey smiled and agreed with Todd Stewart, who declared:

"Carey would win Satan to be his fast friend if the Old Scratch would only let Carey doctor him once."

But nobody understood how the awakening of the latent manhood in Darley Champers and his determination to protect an orphan girl were winning the doctor to him as well.

CHAPTER XVII

The Purple Notches

Two things greater than all things are.
One is Love, and the other War.
And since we know not how War may prove,
Heart of my heart, let us talk of Love.
—*The Ballad of the King's Jest.*

THE summer ran its hot length of days, but it was a gay season for the second generation in the Grass River Valley. Nor drouth nor heat can much annoy when the heart beats young. September would see the first scattering of the happy company for the winter. The last grand rally for the crowd came late in August. Two hayrack loads of young folks, with some few in carriages, were to spend the day at "The Cottonwoods," a far-away picnic ground toward the three headlands of the southwest. Few of the company had ever visited the place. Distances are deceiving on the prairies and better picnic grounds lay nearer to Grass River.

On the afternoon before the picnic Leigh Shirley took her work to the lawn behind the house.

What most ranches gave over to weed patches, or hog lots, or dumping grounds along the stream, at Cloverdale had become a shady clover-sodded lawn sloping down to the river's edge. The biggest cottonwoods and elms in the whole valley grew on this lawn. A hedge of lilac and other shrubbery bordered by sunflowers and hollyhocks bounded it from the fields and trellises of white honeysuckle screened it from the road.

In a rustic seat overlooking the river and the prairies

Leigh turned to see Thaine Aydelot looking down at her as he leaned over the high back of the rustic seat

beyond, Leigh Shirley bent lovingly above a square of heavy white paper on which she was sketching a group of sunflowers glowing in the afternoon sunlight. Leigh's talent was only an undeveloped inheritance, but if it lacked training it's fresh originality was unspoiled.

"The top of the afternoon to you."

Leigh turned to see Thaine Aydelot looking down at her as he leaned over the high back of the rustic seat. He was in his working clothes with his straw hat set back, showing his brown face. His luminous dark eyes were shining and a half-teasing, half-sympathetic smile was on his lips. But whatever the clothes, there was always something of the Southern gentleman about every man of the Thaine blood. Something of the soldierly bearing of his father had been his heritage likewise.

"May I see your stuff, or is it not for the profane eyes of a thresher of alfalfa to look upon?"

Leigh drew back and held up her drawing-board.

"It's just like you, Leigh. You always were an artist, but when did you learn all the technique? Is that what you call it? How do you do it?"

"I don't know," Leigh answered frankly. "It seems to do itself."

"And why do you do it? Or why don't you do more of it?" Thaine asked.

The girl answered, smiling:

"Just between us two, I hope to do a piece good enough to sell and help to lift the price of alfalfa seed a bit."

"By the way, I brought the first load of seed over just now. Where's Uncle Jim?" Thaine asked, trying not to let the pity in his heart show itself in his eyes.

"Uncle Jim is breaking sod — weeds, I mean — for fall sowing. Wait a minute and I'll get you the money he left for you."

Thaine threw himself down in the shade beside Leigh's seat while she went into the house.

"I wish I didn't have to take that money, but I know better than to say a word," he said to himself. "Thank the Lord, the worried look is beginning to leave Uncle Jim's face, though. How could any of us get along without Uncle Jim?"

"What little seed to be worth so much, but it's the beginning of conquest," Leigh said as Thaine took the bills from her hand. "And it's a much more hopeful business to reclaim from booms and weeds than from this lonely old prairie as it was when Uncle Jim and your father first came here."

"It's just the same old pioneer spirit, though, and you are fighting a mortgage just like they fought loneliness, and besides, Asher Aydelot had Virginia Thaine to help him to keep his courage up."

A sudden flush deepened on his ruddy cheeks and he continued:

"Of course you are going to the picnic? You'll have to start early. It's a goodish way to 'The Cottonwoods.' The Sunflower Ranch needs my talents, so I can't go with the crowd, but I may draggle in about high noon. I'll drive over in the buggy, and I'll try to snake some pretty girl off the wagons to ride home with me when it's all over."

"Maybe the pretty girls will all be preempted before you get there," Leigh replied.

"I know one that I hope won't be," Thaine said.

Leigh was bending over her drawing board and did not look up for a long minute. It was her gift to make comfort about her while she followed her own will unflinchingly. The breeze had blown the golden edges of her hair into fluffy ripples about her forehead and the deep blue of August skies was reflected in her blue eyes shaded by their long brown lashes. Thaine sat watching her every motion, as he always did when he was with her.

"Well?" Leigh looked up with the query. "And what's to hinder your getting the pretty girl you want if she understands and you are swift enough to cut off the enemy from a flank movement?"

"The girl herself," Thaine replied.

"Serious! Tragical! Won't you give me that chrome-yellow tube by your elbow there?" Leigh reached for the paint and their hands met.

"Say, little Sketcher of Things, will you be missing me when I go to school next month? Or will your art and your ranch take all your thoughts?"

"I wish they would, but they won't," Leigh said. They will help to fill up the time, though."

"Leigh, may I bring you home tomorrow night? I'm going away the next day, and I won't see you any more for a long time."

"No, you may not," Leigh replied, looking up, and her sunny face framed by her golden brown hair was winsomely pleasing.

"Why not, Leigh? Am I too late?"

"Too early. You haven't asked Jo and been refused yet. But you are kind to put me on the 'waiting list.'"

Thaine was standing beside her now.

"I mean it. Has anybody asked you specially—to be your very particular escort?"

"Oh, yes. The very nicest of the crowd." Leigh's eyes were shining now. "But I've refused him," she added.

"Who was it?"

"Thaine Aydelot, and I refused because it was good taste for me to do it. If it's his last day at home—and —oh, I forget what I was going to say."

"I wish you wouldn't make a joke of it, anyhow. Tell me why you are so unkind to an old neighbor and lifelong pal," Thaine insisted.

But Leigh made no reply.

"Leigh!"

"Tell me why you insist when by all the rules you are due to snake the prettiest girl in the crowd off the wagon and into your buggy. Why aren't you satisfied to make the other boys all envy you?" Leigh had risen and stood beside the rustic seat, her arm across its high back.

"Because it is the last time. Because we've known each other since childhood and have been playmates, chums, companions; because I am going one way and you another, and our paths may widen more and more, and because—oh, Leigh, because I want you."

He leaned against the back of the seat and gently put one hand on her arm.

The yellow August sunshine lay on the level prairies beyond the river. The shining thread of waters wound away across the landscape under a play of light and shadow. The clover sod at their feet was soft and green. The big golden sunflowers hung on their stalks along the border of the lawn, and overhead the ripple of the summer

breezes in the cottonwoods made a music like pattering raindrops. Under their swaying boughs Leigh Shirley stood, a fair, sweet girl. And nothing in the languorous beauty of the midsummer afternoon could have been quite so pleasing without her presence there.

She looked down at Thaine's big brown hand resting against her white arm, and then up to his handsome face.

"It would only make trouble for, for everybody. No, I'm coming home with the crowd on the hayrack." She lifted her arm and began to pull the petals from a tiny sunflower that lay on the seat beside her.

"Very well." There was no anger in Thaine's tone. "Do you remember the big sunflower we found to send to Prince Quippi, once?"

"The one that should bring him straight from China to me, if he really cared for me?" Leigh asked.

"You said that one was to tell him that you loved him and you knew it would bring him to you. But he never came."

"It's a way my princes have of doing," Leigh said with a little laugh.

"If I were in China and you should send me a sunflower, I'd know you wanted me to come back."

"If I ever send you one you will know that I do," Leigh said. "Meantime, my prince will wear a sprig of alfalfa on his coat."

"And a cockle burr in his whiskers, and cerulean blue overalls like mine, and he'll drudge along in a slow scrap with the soil till the soil gets him," Thaine added.

"Like it got your father," Leigh commented.

"Oh, he's just one sort of a man by himself," Thaine

declared. "A pretty good sort, of course, else I'd never have recommended him to be my father. Good-by. I'll see you across the crowd tomorrow."

He turned at once and left her.

"The Cottonwoods" was a picturesque little grove grown in the last decade about a rocky run down which in the springtime a full stream swept. There was only a little ripple over a stony bed now, with shallow pools lost in the deeper basins here and there. The grasses lay flat and brown on the level prairie about it. Down the shaded valley a light cool breeze poured steadily. Beyond the stream a gentle slope reached far away to the foot of the three headlands — the purple notches of Thaine Aydelot's childhood fancies.

The day was ideal. Such days come sometimes in a Kansas August. The young people of the Grass River neighborhood had made merry half of the morning in the grove, and as they gathered for the picnic lunch someone called out:

"Jo Bennington, where's Thaine Aydelot? Great note for him to disappear when this Charity Ball was executed mainly for him."

"Better ask Todd Stewart. He's probably had Thaine kidnaped for this occasion," somebody else suggested.

"I tried to do it and failed," Todd Stewart assented. "I don't need him in my business. He can start to school today if he wants to."

"Well, you don't want him to go, do you, Jo?"

"Oh, I don't care especially. I'm going away myself, but not to the University, but I'm not going till papa's elected," Jo replied.

"And if papa's defeated we stay home all winter, eh?" Todd questioned.

"That all depends," Jo replied.

"Of course it does. What is it, and who depends on it? Jo, I'll help you if you must defend yourself."

Thaine Aydelot bounced down from the rocky bank above into the midst of the company and became at once Jo's escort by common consent.

"Now life's worth living, Thaine's here. Let's have dinner," the boys urged.

It was not Leigh Shirley's fault that Thaine should be placed between her and Jo at the spread of good things to eat; nor Jo's planning that she should be between Thaine and Todd Stewart. But nobody could be unhappy today.

In the late afternoon the crowd strolled in couples and quartettes and groups up and down the picturesque place.

Thaine had been with Jo from the moment of his coming and Leigh was glad that she had not yielded to his request of the afternoon before. She had become a little separated from the company as she followed a trail of golden sunflowers down the edge of the wide space between the stream and the foot of the headlands towering far beyond it. The sun had disappeared suddenly and the gleam of the blossoms dulled a trifle. Leigh sat down on a slab of shale to study the effect of the shadow.

"Are you still looking for a letter that will bring Prince Quippi back?" Thaine Aydelot asked as he climbed up from the rough stream bed to a seat beside her.

"I'm watching the effect of sunshine and shadow on the sunflowers," Leigh replied.

"It will be all shadow if you wait much longer. The clouds are gathering now and we must start home."

"Then I must be going, too. It's a lovely, lazy place here, though. Some time I'm going to the top of those bluffs, away off there."

"Let's go up now," Thaine suggested.

"But it's too late. I mustn't keep the crowd waiting," Leigh insisted. "It's a stiff climb, too."

"I can drive up. I know a trail through the brush. Let me drive you up, Leigh. It won't take long. There's something worth seeing up there," Thaine insisted.

"Well, be quick, Thaine. We'll get into trouble if we are late," Leigh declared.

The trail up the steep slope twisted its way back and forth through the low timber that covered the sides of the bluffs, and the two in the buggy found themselves shut away in its solitary windings.

"What a shadowy road," Leigh said. "And see that cliff dropping down beyond that turn. How could there be such a romantic place out on these level plains?"

"It was my fairy land when I was a little tot," Thaine replied. "I came here long ago and explored it myself."

"I'd like to come here sketching sometime. See how the branches meet overhead. The odors from the bluffside are like the odors of the woodland back in the Clover valley in Ohio. I remember them yet, although I was so little when I left there," Leigh said, turning to Thaine.

He shifted the reins, and throwing his hat in the buggy before him he pushed back the hair from his forehead.

"Leigh, will you let me take you home? I didn't ask Jo after all. Todd wouldn't wait long enough for me to

do that, as I knew well enough he wouldn't. Don't be mad at me. Please don't," he pleaded.

"Why, I'm glad if you really want me to go with you, but you shouldn't have staid away this morning."

"I did it on purpose. I knew Todd wouldn't let the chance slip — nor Jo neither, if I let him have it."

"You let him have it merely because you didn't want the chance today. Your kindness will be your undoing some day," Leigh said with a smile that took off the edge of sarcasm.

Thaine said nothing in response, and they climbed slowly to the top of the bluff and stood at last on the crest of the middle headland.

Below them lay "The Cottonwoods" and the winding stream whose course, marked by the dark green line of shrubbery, stretched away toward Grass River far to the southeast. To the westward a wonderful vista of level prairie spread endlessly, wherein no line of shrubbery marked a watercourse nor tree rose up to break the circle of the horizon. Over all this vast plain the three headlands stood as sentinels. In the west the sunlight had pierced a heavy cloudbank and was pouring through the rift in one broad sheet of gold mist from sky to earth. Purple and silver and burnt umber, with green and gray and richest orange, blended all in the tones of the landscape, overhung now by a storm-girdled sky.

"This prairie belongs mostly to John Jacobs now and it is just as it was when the Indians called it the Grand Prairie and the old Pawnees came down here every summer to hunt buffalo. Some day, soon, there will be a sea of wheat flowing over all that level plain," Thaine said.

"And up here a home with nothing to cut off a fragment of the whole horizon. Think of seeing every sunrise and every sunset from a place like this," Leigh said, her face aglow with an artist's love of beauty. "It's farther to China than I used to think when I dreamed of a purple velvet house decorated with gold knobs beyond these three headlands."

"I always did want to live on the Purple Notches," Thaine said reminiscently. "I'm glad we came up here today."

The sound of singing came faintly up from the valley far away.

"The crowd is mobilized. See the wagons crawling out of the grove and the civilians in citizens' clothes following in carriages," Thaine said as he watched the picnic party pushing out toward the eastward. "I'm so glad we aren't with them."

Leigh sat leaning forward, looking at the majestic distances lost in purple haze, overshadowed by purple clouds with gold-broidered edges of sunlight.

"The world is all ours for once. We see all there is of it and yet we are alone in it up here on the purple notches I used to dream about," she said softly.

Thaine leaned back in his buggy and looked at Leigh with the same impenetrable expression on his countenance that was always there when she was present.

"Leigh," he said at last, "if you didn't have Uncle Jim what would you do?"

"I don't know," the girl answered.

"I never knew one of the fellows who didn't like you, but you, you don't seem to care for any of them. Don't they suit you?" Thaine asked.

"Yes, but I can't think much about them."

"Why not?"

Leigh drew a long breath.

"Thaine, you have always been a good friend to me. Some day I'll tell you why."

"Tell me now," Thaine insisted gently.

Leigh looked up, a mist of tears in her violet eyes.

"Oh, little girl, forgive me. It's because — because," Thaine hesitated. "Because deep down where nobody ever knew I've loved you always, Leigh. I didn't know how much until the night of my party and the day we were at Wykerton."

"Thaine! Thaine! you mustn't say such things," Leigh cried, gripping her hands together. "You mustn't! You mustn't!"

"But I must, and I will," Thaine declared.

"Then I won't listen to you. You are a flirt. Not satisfied with making one girl love you, you want to make all of us care for you."

"I know what you mean. I thought I loved Jo. Then I knew I didn't, and I felt in honor bound to keep her from finding it out. But that's a dead failure of a business. You can't play that game and win. I've learned a good many things this summer, and one of them is that Todd Stewart is the only one who really and truly loves Jo, and she cares as much for him as she does for anybody."

"How do you know?" Leigh asked as she leaned back now and faced Thaine.

"Because she doesn't know herself yet. She's too spoiled by the indulgence of everybody and too pretty. She wants attention. But I found finally, maybe mother helped me

a little, that if she has Todd's attention she's satisfied. More, she's comfortable. She was always on thorns with me. Isn't that enough about Jo?"

"Well?" Leigh queried.

"No, nothing is well yet. Leigh, let me go away to the University. Let me make a name for myself, a world-wide name, maybe, let me fight on my frontier line and then come back and lift the burden you carry now. I want to do big things somewhere away from the Kansas prairies, away from the grind of the farm and country life. Oh, Leigh, you are the only girl I ever can really love."

He leaned forward and took her hands in his own, his dark eyes, beautiful with the light of love, looking down into hers, his face aglow with the ambition of undisciplined youth.

"Let me help you," he pleaded.

"It is only sympathy you offer, Thaine, and I don't want sympathy. You said that game wouldn't win with Jo. Neither would it with me. I am happy in my work. I'm not afraid of it. The harder part is to get enough money to buy seed and pay interest, and Uncle Jim and I will earn that. I tell you the mortgage must be lifted by alfalfa roots just as Coburn's book says it will be."

There was a defiant little curve on her red lips and the brave hopefulness of her face was inspiring.

"Go and do your work, Thaine. Fight your battles, push back your frontier line, win your wilderness, and make a world-wide name for yourself. But when all is done don't forget that the fight your father and mother made here, and are making today, is honorable, wonderful; and that the winning of a Kansas farm, the kingdom of

golden wheat, bordered round by golden sunflowers, is a real kingdom. Its sinews of strength uphold the nation."

"Why, you eloquent little Jayhawker!" Thaine exclaimed. "You should have been an orator on the side, not an artist. But all this only makes me care the more. I'm proud of you. I'd want you for my chum if you were a boy. I want you for my friend, but down under all this I want you for my girl now, and afterwhile, Leigh, I want you for my own, all mine. Don't you care for me? Couldn't you learn to care, Leigh? Couldn't you go with me to a broader life somewhere out in the real big world? Couldn't we come some time to the Purple Notches and build a home for just our summer days, because we have seen these headlands all our lives?"

Leigh's head was bowed, and the pink blooms left her cheeks.

"Thaine," she said in a low voice that thrilled him with its sweetness, "I do care. I have always cared so much that I have hoped this moment might never come."

Thaine caught her arm eagerly.

"No! no! We can never, never be anything but friends, and if you care more than that for me now, if you really love me—" the voice was very soft—"don't ask me why. I cannot tell you, but I know we can never be anything more than friends, never, never."

The sorrow on her white face, the pathos of the great violet eyes, the firm outline of the red lips told Thaine Aydelot that words were hopeless. He had known her every mood from childhood. She never dallied nor hesitated. The grief of her answer went too deep for words to argue against. And withal Thaine Aydelot was very

proud and unaccustomed to being denied what he chose to want very much.

"Leigh, will you do two things for me?" he asked at length. The sad, quiet tone was unlike Thaine Aydelot.

"If I can," Leigh answered.

"First, will you promise me that if you want me you will send for me. If you ever find—oh, Leigh, ever is such a long word. If you ever think you can care enough for me to let me come back to you, you will let me know."

"When I send you the little sunflower letter Prince Quippi never answered you may come back," Leigh said lightly, but the tears were too near for the promise to seem trivial. "What is the other thing?"

"I want you just once to let me kiss you, Leigh. It's our good-by kiss forever. Hereafter we are only friends, old chums, you know. Will you let me be your lover for one minute up here on the Purple Notches, where the whole world lies around us and nobody knows our secret? Please, Leigh. Then I'll go away and be a man somewhere in the big world that's always needing men."

Leigh leaned toward him, and he held her close as he kissed her red lips. In all the stormy days that followed the memory of that moment was with him. A moment when love, in all its purity and joy, knew its first realization.

The next day Leigh Shirley made butter all the morning, and in the afternoon she tried to retouch her sketch of sunflowers as she had seen the shadows dull the brightness of their petals in the valley below the Purple Notches.

The same day Thaine Aydelot left home for the winter, taking the memory of the most sacred moment of his life with him out into the big world that is always needing men.

CHAPTER XVIII

Remembering the *Maine*

> The Twentieth Kansas was fortunate in opportunity, and heroic in action, and has won a permanent place in the hearts of a grateful people.
>
> —William McKinley.

THE sunny plains of Kansas were fair and full of growing in the spring of 1898. The alfalfa creeping out against the weeds of the old Cloverdale Ranch was green under the April sunshine. The breezes sweeping down the Grass River Valley carried a vigor in their caress. The Aydelot grove, just budding into leaf, was full of wild birds' song. All the sights and sounds and odors of springtime made the April day entrancing on the Kansas prairies.

Leigh Shirley had risen at dawn and come up to the grove in the early morning. She tethered her pony to graze by the roadside, and with her drawing board on a slender easel she stood on the driveway across the lakelet, busy for awhile with her paints and pencil. Then the sweetness of the morning air, the gurgling waters at the lake's outlet, once the little draw choked with wild plum bushes, and the trills of music from the shimmering boughs above her head, all combined to make dreaming pleasant. She dropped her brushes and stood looking at the lake and the bit of open woodland, and through it to the wide level fields beyond, with the river gleaming here and there under the touch of the morning light.

She recalled in contrast the silver and sable tones of the May night when she and Thaine sat on the driveway and saw the creamy water lilies open their hearts to the wooing moonlight and the caressing shadows. It was a fairyland here that night. It was plain daylight now, beautiful, but real. Life seemed a dream that night. It was very real this April morning. The young artist involuntarily drew a deep breath that was half a sigh and stooped to pick up her fallen brushes. But she dropped them again with a glad cry. Far across the lake, in the leaf-checkered sunshine, Thaine Aydelot stood smiling at her.

"Shall I stay here and spoil your landscape or come around and shake hands?" he called across to her.

"Oh, come over here and tell me how you happened," Leigh cried eagerly.

Grass River people blamed the two years of the University life for breaking Thaine Aydelot's interest in Jo Bennington. Not that Jo lacked for admirers without him. Life had been made so pleasant for her that she had not gone away to any school, even after her father's election to office. And down at the University the pretty girls considered Thaine perfectly heartless, for now in his second year they were still baffled by his general admiration and undivided indifference toward all of them. His eager face as he came striding up the driveway to meet Leigh Shirley would have been a revelation to them.

"I 'happened' last night, too late to wake up the dog," Thaine exclaimed. "I happened to run against Dr. Carey, who had a hurry-up call down this way, and he happened to drop me at the Sunflower Inn. He's coming by for breakfast at my urgent demand. This country night prac-

tice is enough to kill a doctor. His hair is whiter than ever, young as he is. He said he is going to take a trip out West and have a vacation right soon. I told him all my plans. You can tell him anything, you know. And, besides, I'm hoping he will beat me to the house this morning and will tell the folks I'm here."

"Doesn't your mother know you are here?" Leigh asked.

"Not yet. I wanted to come down early and tell the lake goodby. I have to leave again in a few hours."

The old impenetrable expression had dropped over his face with the words. And nobody knows why the sunshine grew dull and the birds' songs dropped to busy twittering about unimportant things.

"Do you always tell it goodby?" Leigh asked, because she could think of nothing else to say.

"Not always, but this time it's different. I'm so glad I found you. I should have gone down to Cloverdale, of course, if you hadn't been here, but this saves time."

A pink wave swept Leigh's cheek, but she smiled a pleasant recognition of his thoughtfulness.

"I've come home to say goodby because I'm going to enlist in the first Kansas regiment that goes to Cuba to fight the Spaniards. And I must hurry back to Lawrence."

"Oh, Thaine! What do you mean?"

Leigh's face was very white.

"Be careful!"

Thaine caught her arm in time to save the light easel from being thrown over.

"Don't look at me that way, Leigh. Don't you know that President McKinley has declared war and has called

for one hundred and twenty-five thousand volunteers? Four or five thousand from old Kansas. Do you reckon we Jayhawkers will wait till one hundred and twenty thousand have enlisted and trail in on the last five thousand? It would be against all traditions of the rude forefathers of the Sunflower State."

"Has war really been declared? We haven't had the papers for nearly a week. Everybody is so busy with farm work right now."

Leigh stood looking anxiously at Thaine.

"Declared! The first gun has been fired. The call for volunteers has come from Washington, and the Governor has said he will make Fred Funston Colonel of the first regiment of Kansas volunteers, and he sent out his appeal for loyal Kansas men to offer themselves. I tell you again, Leigh Shirley, I'll not be the one hundred and twenty-five thousandth man in the line. I'm going to be right close up to little Fred Funston, our Kansas boy, who is to be our Colonel. I have a notion that University students will make the right kind of soldiers. There will be plenty of ignorance and disloyalty and drafting into line on the Spanish side. America must send an intelligent private if the war is to be fought out quickly. I'm that intelligent gentleman."

"But why must we fight at all, Thaine? Spain has her islands in every sea. We are almost an inland country. Spain is a naval power. Who ever heard of the United States being a naval power? I don't understand what is back of all this fuss." Leigh asked the questions eagerly.

"We fight because we remember the *Maine*," Thaine said a little boastfully. "We are keeping in mind the two hun-

dred and sixty-six American sailors who perished when our good ship was sunk in the harbor at Havana last February. If we aren't a naval power now we may develop some sinews of strength before we are through. Your Uncle Sam is a nervy citizen, and it was a sorry day for proud old Spain when she lighted the fuse to blow up our good warship. It was a fool's trick that we'll make Spain pay dearly for yet."

"So it's just for revenge, then, for the *Maine* horror. Thaine, think how many times worse than that this war might be. Isn't there any way to punish Spain except by sending more Americans to be killed by her fuses and her guns?" Leigh insisted.

"There is more than the *Maine* affair," Thaine assured her. "You know, just off our coast, almost in sight of our guns, Spain has held Cuba for all these centuries in a bondage of degradation and ignorance and cruel oppression. You know there has been an awful warfare going on there for three years between the Spanish government and the rebels against it. And that for a year and a half the atrocities of Weyler, the Captain General of the Spanish forces, make an unprintable record. The United States has declared war, not to retaliate for the loss of the *Maine* alone, awful as it was, but to right wrongs too long neglected, to put a twentieth century civilization instead of a sixteenth century barbarity in Cuba."

Thaine was reciting his lesson glibly, but Leigh broke in.

"But why must you go? You, an only child?"

She had never seen a soldier. Her knowledge of warfare had been given her by the stories Jim Shirley and Dr. Carey had told to her in her childhood.

"It's really not my fault that I'm an only child. It's an inheritance. My father was an only child, too. He went to war at the mature age of fifteen. I'll be twenty-one betimes." Thaine stood up with military stiffness.

"Your father fought to save his country. You just want gold lace and a lark. War is no frolic, Thaine Aydelot," Leigh insisted.

"I'm not counting on a frolic, Miss Shirley, and I don't want any gold lace till I have earned it," Thaine declared proudly.

"Then why do you go?" Leigh queried.

"I go in the name of patriotism. Wars don't just happen. At least, that is what the professor at the University tells us. Back of this Spanish fuss is a bigger turn waiting than has been foretold. Watch and see if I am not a prophet. This is a war to right human wrongs. That's why we are going into it."

"But your father wants you here. The Sunflower Ranch is waiting for you," Leigh urged.

"His father wanted him to stay in Ohio, so our family history runs. But Mr. Asher heard the calling of the prairies. His wilderness lay on the Kansas plains, and he came out and drove back the frontier line and pretty near won it. At least, he's got a wheat crop in this year that looks some like success."

Thaine smiled, but Leigh's face was grave.

"Leighlie, my frontier is where the Spanish yoke hangs heavy on the necks of slaves. I must go and win it. I must drive back my frontier line where I find it, not where my grandfather found it. I must do a man's part in the world's work."

His voice was full of earnestness and his dark eyes were glowing with the fire of inspiration. By the patriotism and enthusiasm of the youth of twenty-one has victory come to many a battlefield.

"But I don't want you to go away to war," Leigh pleaded.

"You don't want me here."

Thaine let his hand rest gently on hers for a moment as it lay on top of the easel; then hastily withdrew it.

"Has your alfalfa struck root deep enough to begin to pull up that mortgage yet?" he inquired, as if to drop the unpleasant subject.

"Not yet," Leigh answered. "We make every acre help to seed more acres. It's an uphill pull. It's my war with Spain, you know. But I'm doing something with these little daubs of mine. I have sold a few pieces. The price wasn't large, but it was something to put against a hungry interest account. Some day I want to paint—" she hesitated.

"What?" Thaine asked.

Leigh was bending over her brushes and paints, and did not look up as she said with an effort at indifference:

"Oh, the Purple Notches. It is so beautiful over there."

Thaine bit his lips to hold back the words, and Leigh went on:

"Dr. Carey says Uncle Jim couldn't have held out long at general farming. But the Coburn book was right. The alfalfa is the silent subsoiler, and when the whole quarter is seeded we'll pull that mortgage up by the roots, all right."

She looked up with shining eyes, and Thaine took both of her hands in his, saying:

"I must tell you goodby now. Mother will know I am here and will be dragging the lake for me. This isn't like other goodbys. Of course, I may come back a Brigadier General and make you very proud of me, or I might not come at all, but I won't say that. Oh, Leigh, Leigh, may I tell you once more how dear you are to me? Will you promise again to send me the same message you sent to Prince Quippi when you want me to come back?"

"I will," Leigh replied in a low voice, and for that moment the grove became for them a holy sanctuary, wherein their words were sacred vows.

When Thaine reached home again, Dr. Carey was just leaving, and the way was prepared for the purpose of his own coming, as he had hoped it would be.

"I've a call to make across the river. I'll be back in time to take you up to catch the train. There's a feast of a breakfast waiting in there for you. I know, for I had my share of it. Goodby for an hour or two."

The doctor waved his hand to Thaine and drove away.

"So the wanderlust and spirit of adventure in the Aydelot blood got you after all," Asher Aydelot said as he looked across the breakfast table at his son. "It seems such a little while ago that I was a boy in Ohio, a foolish fifteen-year-old, crazy to see and be into what I've wished so often since that I could forget."

"But you don't object, Father?" Thaine asked eagerly.

Asher did not reply at once. A rush of boyhood memories flooded his mind, and as he looked at Virginia he recalled how his mother had looked at him on the day he

left home to join the Third Ohio regiment nearly forty years ago. And then he remembered the moonlit night and his mother's blessing when he told of his longing for the open West, where opportunity hunts the man.

"No, Thaine," he answered gently at last. "All I ask is that you try to foresee what is coming in hardship and responsibility. Young men go to war for adventure mostly. The army life may make a hero of you, not by brevet nor always by official record, but a hero nevertheless in bravery where courage is needed, and in a sense of duty done. Or it can make a low-grade scoundrel of you almost before you know it, if you do not put yourself on guard duty over yourself twenty-four hours out of every twenty-four. War means real hardship. It is in everything the opposite of peace. And this war foreshadows big events. It may lead you to Cuba or to the Orient. Our Asiatic squadron is ordered from Hong Kong. Dr. Carey tells me it is going to meet the Spanish navy in the Philippines. I thought I fixed the West when I came here as a scout and later a settler, and drove the frontier back with my rifle and my hoe. Is it possible your frontier is further westward still? Even across the Pacific Ocean, where another kind of wilderness lies?"

Into Asher's clear gray eyes, that for all the years had held the vision of the wide, pathless prairies redeemed to fruitfulness, there was a vision now of the big things with which the twentieth century must cope. The work of a generation younger than his own.

"Don't forget two things, Thaine, when you are fairly started in this campaign. First, that wars do not last forever. They jar the frontier line back by leaps, but

after war is over the good old prairie soil is waiting still for you — acres and acres yet unredeemed. And secondly, while you are a soldier don't waste energy with memories. Fight when you wear a uniform, and dream and remember when the guns are cold. You have my blessing, Thaine, only remember the blessing of Moses to Asher of old, 'As your day so will your strength be.' But you must have your mother's approval too."

Thaine looked lovingly at his mother, and the picture of her fine face lighted by eyes full of mother love staid with him through all the months that followed. And all the old family pride of the Thaines of Virginia, all the old sense of control and daring was in her tone as she answered:

"You have come to a man's estate. You must choose for yourself. But big as the world is, it is too little for mothers to be lost in. You cannot find a frontier so far that a mother's love has not outrun you to it. Go out and win."

"You are a Trojan, mother. I hope I'll always be worthy of your love, wherever I am," her son murmured.

Two hours later, when Dr. Carey stopped for Thaine, Virginia Aydelot came down to his buggy. Her face was very white and her eyes were shining with heroic resolve to be brave to the last.

"Horace, you may be glad you have no children," she said, as they waited for Thaine and his father to come out.

"My life has had many opportunities for service that must make up for the lack of other blessings. It may have further opportunity soon. May I ask a favor of you?"

Virginia was not to blame that her heart was too full to

catch the undertone of sorrow in Horace Carey's words as she replied graciously:

"Anything that I can grant."

"Life is rather uncertain — even with a good doctor in the community —" Dr. Carey's smile was always winning. "I have hoarded less than I should have done if there had been a Carey to follow me. There will be nobody but Bo Peep to miss me, especially after awhile. I want you to give him a home if he ever needs one. He has some earnings to keep him from want. But you and I are the only Virginians in the valley. Promise me!"

"Of course I will, always, Horace. Be sure of that."

"Thank you, Virginia. I am planning to start to California in a few days. I may be gone for several months. I'll tell you goodby now, for I may not be down this way again before I go."

Virginia remembered afterward the doctor's strong handclasp and the steady gaze of his dark eyes and the pathos of his voice as he bade her goodby. But she did not note these then, for at that moment Thaine came down the walk with his father, and in the sorrow of parting with her son she had no mind for other things.

Dreary rains filled up the first days of May. At Camp Leedy, where the Kansas volunteers mobilized on the old Fair Ground on the outskirts of Topeka, Thaine Aydelot sat under the shelter of his tent watching the water pouring down the canvas walls of other tents and overflowing the deep ruts that cut the grassy sod with long muddy gashes. Camp Leedy was made up mostly of muddy gashes crossed by streams of semi-liquid mud supposed to be roads. Thaine sat on a pile of sodden straw. His clothing was

muddy, his feet were wet, and the chill of the cold rain made him shiver.

"Noble warfare, this!" he said to himself. "Asher Aydelot knew his bearing when he told me that war was no ways like peace. I wonder what's going on right now down at the Sunflower Ranch. The rain ought to fill that old spillway draw from the lake down in the woods. It's nearly time for the water lilies to bloom, too."

The memory of the May night two years before with Leigh Shirley, all pink and white and sweet and modest, came surging across his mind as a heavy dash of rain deluged the tent walls about him.

"Look here, Private Thaine Aydelot, Twentieth Kansas Volunteers, if you are going to be a soldier stop that memory business right here, except to remember what Private Asher Aydelot, of the Third Ohio Infantry, told you about guard duty twenty-six hours out of twenty-four. Heigh ho!"

Thaine ended with a sigh, then he shut his teeth grimly and stared at the unceasing downpour with unseeing eyes.

A noisy demonstration in the camp roused him, and in a minute more young Todd Stewart lay stretched at full length in the mud before his tent.

"Welcome to our city, whose beauties have overcome others also," Thaine said, as he helped Todd to rise from the mud.

"Well, you look good to me, whether I do to you or not," Todd declared, as he scraped at the muddy plaster on his clothing.

"Enter!" Thaine exclaimed dramatically, holding back the tent flaps. "I hope you are not wounded."

Todd limped inside and sat down on the wet straw.

"No, my company just got to camp. I was so crazy to see anybody from the short grass country that I made a slide your way too swiftly. I don't mind these clothes, for I'll be getting my soldier's togs in a minute anyhow, but I did twist that ankle in my zeal. Where's your uniform?" Todd asked, staring at Thaine's clothes.

"With yours, still. Make a minute of it when you get it, won't you?" Thaine replied. "Our common Uncle wants soldiers. He has no time to give to their clothes. A ragged shirt or naked breast will stop a Spanish bullet as well as a khaki suit."

"Do you mean to say you haven't your soldier uniform yet?" Todd broke in.

"A few of us have, but most of us haven't. They cost something," Thaine said with a shiver, for the May afternoon was chilly.

"Then I'll not stay here and risk my precious life for a government so darned little and stingy."

Todd sprang up with the words, but fell down again, clasping his ankle.

"Oh, yes, you will. You've enlisted already, and you have a bad ankle already. Let me see it."

Thaine examined the sprained limb carefully. He had something of his father's ability for such things combined with his mother's gentle touch.

"Let me bind it up a little while you tell me about Grass River. Then hie thee to a hospital," he said.

"There's nothing new, except that Dr. Carey has gone West for a vacation and John Jacobs is raising cain over at Wykerton because a hired hand, just a waif of an

orphan boy, got drunk in Hans Wyker's joint and fell into Big Wolf and was drowned. Funny thing about it was that Darley Champers came out against Wyker for the first time. It may go hard with the old Dutchman yet. Jim Shirley isn't very well, but he never complains, you know. Jo Bennington was wild to have me enlist. I suppose some pretty University girl was backing you all the time," Todd said enthusiastically.

"The only pretty girl I care for didn't want me to go to the war at all," Thaine replied, staring gloomily out at the rain.

"Well, why do you go, then?" Todd inquired.

"Oh, she doesn't specially care for me here, either," Thaine replied. "Girls don't control this game for me. But we have some princes of men here all right."

"As for instance?" Todd queried.

"My captain, Adna Clarke, and his lieutenants, Krause and Alford. They were first to enlist in our company down in the old rink at Lawrence. Captain Clarke is the kind of a man who makes you feel like straightening right up to duty when you see him coming, and he is so genial in his discipline it is not like discipline. Lieutenant Krause fits in with him—hand and glove. But, Todd," Thaine went on enthusiastically, "if you meet a man on this camp-ground with the face of a gentleman, the manners of a soldier, a smile like sunshine after a dull day in February, and a, well a sort of air about him that makes you feel he's your friend and that doing a kind act is the only thing a fellow should ever think of doing—that's Lieutenant Alford. There are some fine University boys here and we have all packed up our old Kansas University yell, 'Rock

Chalk! Jay Hawk! K U!' to use on the Spanish. We'll make them learn to run whenever they hear that yell. The whole regiment is a credit to Kansas, if we haven't the clothes right now. You are rather a disreputable looking old mudball yourself. Let's try to get to the hospital tent."

Thaine lifted Todd Stewart to his feet, and as they started up the slushy way to the hospital tent, he said:

"Yonder is Lieutenant Alford now."

A young man with a face as genial as his manner was dignified responded pleasantly to the private's salute, and the rainfall seemed less dreary and all the camp more cheerful for this lieutenant's presence. No wonder he seemed a prince to the enthusiastic young soldier whose admiration deepened into an abiding love he was never to lose out of his life in all the years to come. In the months that followed Thaine came to know Captain Clarke and his two lieutenants, Krause and Alford, as soldier knows soldier. Nor did ever Trojan nor Roman military hero have truer homage from the common private than the boy from the Grass River Valley paid to these young men commanding his company.

The hardships of soldier life began for Thaine Aydelot and his regiment with the day of enlistment. The privations at Camp Leedy were many. The volunteers had come in meagerly clothed because they expected to be fully supplied by the government they were to serve. The camp equipments were insufficient. The food was poor, and day after day the rain poured mercilessly down on the muddy campground, where the volunteers slept on wet straw piled on the wet earth. Sore throats, colds, and pneumonia re-

sulted, and many a homesick boy who learned to wade the rice swamps and to face the Mauser's bullets fearlessly had his first hard lesson of endurance taught to him before he left Camp Leedy on the old Topeka Fair Ground.

Wonderful history-making filled up the May days. While the fleets and land forces were moving against Cuba, the deep sea cable brought the brief story from Commodore Dewey in the harbor of Manila, "Eleven Spanish warships destroyed and no Americans killed."

And suddenly the center of interest shifted from the Cuban Island near at hand to the Philippines on the other side of the world. The front door of America that for four centuries had opened on the Atlantic ocean opened once and forever on Pacific waters. A new frontier receding ever before the footprint of the Anglo-American flung itself about the far-off island of the Orient with its old alluring call:

> Something lost behind the Ranges!
> Over Yonder! Go you there!

And the Twentieth Kansas, under Colonel Fred Funston, broke camp and hurried to San Francisco to be ready to answer that call.

Thaine Aydelot had never been outside of Kansas before. Small wonder that the mountains, the desert, the vinelands, and orchard-lands, and rose-lands of California, the half-orientalism of San Francisco and the Pacific Ocean with its world-old mystery of untamed immensity should fill each day with a newer interest; or that the conditions of soldier life at Camp Merritt beside the Golden Gate, to which the eager-hearted, untrained young student from the Kansas

prairie brought all his youthful enthusiasm and patriotism and love of adventure, should wound his spirit and test his power of self-control. Small wonder, too, that the Twentieth Kansas Regiment, poorly equipped, undrilled, and non-uniformed still, should make only a sorry showing among the splendid regiments mobilized there; or that to the big, rich City of San Francisco the ragged fellows from the prairies, who were dubbed the "Kansas Scarecrows," should become the byword and laughing stock among things military.

One neglect followed another for the Kansas Twentieth. The poorest camping spot was their portion. The chill of the nights, the heat of the days oppressed them. The filth of their unsanitary grounds bred discomfort and disease.

But no military favors were shown them, and the same old stupid jests and jibes of the ignorant citizen of the other states were repeated on the Pacific seaboard. When the thirtieth of May called forth the military forces in one grand parade the Twentieth Kansas was not invited to take part.

For Thaine Aydelot, to whom Decoration Day was a sacred Sabbath always, this greatest of all indignities cut deep where a man's soul feels keenest. And when transport after transport sailed out of the San Francisco harbor, loaded with regiments for the Philippines, and still the Twentieth Kansas was left in idle waiting on the dreary sand lots of Camp Merritt and the Presidio reservation, the silent campaign that really makes a soldier was waged daily in Thaine and his comrades.

"Don't complain, boys," Captain Clarke admonished his

company. "We'll be ready when we are called, and that's what really counts."

Other commanders of the regiment gave the same encouragement. So the daily drilling went on. The sons of the indomitable men and women who had conquered the border ruffian, the hostile Plains Indian, and the unfriendly prairie sod, these sons kept their faith in themselves, their pride in the old Kansas State that bore them, and their everlasting good humor and energy and ability to learn. Such men are the salt of the earth.

Todd Stewart made a brave struggle, but his slide on the muddy ground at Camp Leedy was his military undoing, and his discharge followed.

"I'm going to start back to old Grass River tomorrow," he said to Thaine Aydelot, who had called to see him with face aglow. "I've made the best fight I could, but the doctor says the infantry needs two legs, and neither one wooden. But best of all, Thaine, Jo has written that she wants me to come home. It's not so bad if there's a welcome like that waiting. She is slowly overcoming her dislike for country life. But I can't help envying you."

"Oh, you'll stand on both feet all right when you get them both on the short grass of the prairie again, and, as you say, the welcome makes up for a good many losses."

Something impenetrable came into his eyes for the moment only and then the fire of enthusiasm burned again in them, for Thaine's nerves were a-tingle with the ambition and anticipation of the young soldier waiting immediate orders, and he changed the subject eagerly.

"I came to tell you something, Todd. We are to sail

the seas on the next transport to Manila, sure. And we'll see service yet, all right."

Thaine threw his cap in air and danced about the bed in his enthusiasm.

"Glory be! Won't Fred Funston do things when he hits the Orient? Best colonel that ever had the U. S. military engines to buck against."

Todd rejoiced, even in his own disappointment.

"But see here, Thaine, me child, I also have a bit of news that may interest you plumb through. My surgeon isn't equal to the Philippines either, nor the Ephesians, nor Colossians, and he's going back to some fort in the mountains. Who do you s'pose will take his place? Now, who?"

"How should I know? Seeing I've got to get this regiment off, I have to leave the hospital corps to you. Who is it?" Thaine asked.

"Dr. Horace Carey, M.D.!" Todd replied.

"You don't mean it!" Thaine gasped.

"Yes, he does, Thaine." It was Horace Carey who spoke, as he entered the hospital quarter, and, as everywhere else, the same engaging smile and magnetic charm of personality filled the place.

Thaine turned and gathered him in close embrace.

"Oh, Dr. Carey, are you really going?" He whistled, and shouted, and executed jigs in his joy. "Why do you go? Can you leave Kansas? You and me both? Oh, hurry home, Todd, and show Governor Leedy how to run things without us." And much more to like effect.

"I've a notion I'm the right man to go," Horace Carey answered. "I had experience in the late Civil War, which

seems trifling to you fellows at the Presidio. I rode the Plains for some years more when rattlesnakes and Indian arrows — poisoned at that — and cholera and mountain fever called for a surgeon's aid. I have diplomas and things from the best schools in the East. I have also some good military friends in authority to back me in getting a surgeon's place in the army — and, lastly, I haven't a soul to miss me, nor home to leave dreary, if I get between you and the enemy; nobody but Boanerges Peeperville to care personally, and Mrs. Aydelot, as the only other aristocrat in the Grass River Valley, has promised to give him a home. He has always adored Virginia, Thaine, since he could remember anything."

Thaine Aydelot was only twenty-one, with little need hitherto for experience in reading human nature. Moreover, he was alert in every tingling nerve with the anticipation of an ocean voyage and of strange new sights and daring deeds half a world away. Yet something in Dr. Carey's strong face seemed to imply a deeper purpose than his words suggested. A faint sense of the nobility of the man gripped him and grew upon him, and never in the years that followed was separate from the memory of the doctor he had loved from babyhood.

When the Ohio woodlands were gorgeous with the frost-fired splendor of October word came to Miss Jane Aydelot, of the old Aydelot farmhouse beside the National pike road, that one Thaine Aydelot had sailed from San Francisco with the Twentieth Kansas Regiment to see service in the Philippine Islands. On board the same transport was Dr. Horace Carey, of the military medical staff. That winter

Jane Aydelot's hair turned white, but the pink bloom of her cheeks and the light of her clear gray eyes made her a sweet-faced woman still, whose loveliness grew with the years.

The kiss of the same October breezes was on the Kansas prairie with the hazy horizon and the infinite beauty of wide, level landscapes, overhung by the infinite beauty of blue, tender skies. Boanerges Peeperville, established as cook in the Sunflower Inn, was at home in his cosy little quarter beside the grape arbor of the rear dooryard.

"Tell me, Bo Peep, why Dr. Carey should enter the army again and go to the Philippines?" Virginia Aydelot asked on the day the news reached the Sunflower Ranch.

Bo Peep did not answer at once. Virginia was busy arranging some big yellow chrysanthemums in a tall cut-glass vase that Dr. Carey had left to be sent down to her when Bo Peep should come to the Aydelots to make his home.

"See, Bo Peep, aren't they pretty? Set them in the middle of the table there, carefully. The first bouquet we ever had on our table was a few little sunflowers in an old peach can wrapped round with a newspaper. You didn't answer my question. Why did Horace go so far away?"

The servant took the vase carefully and placed it as commanded. Then he turned to Virginia with a face full of intense feeling.

"Miss Virgie, I done carry messages for him all my days." The pathos of the soft voice was touching. "I wasn't to give this las' one to you less'n he neveh come back. An Mis' Virgie, Doctoh Carey won't neveh come

back no mo'. But I kaint tell you yet jus' why he done taken hisself to the Fillippians, not yet."

"Why do you think he will never come back? You think Thaine will come home again, don't you?" Virginia queried.

"Oh, yas'm! yas'm! Misteh Thaine, he'll come back all right. But hit's done fo'casted in my bones that Doctoh Horace won't neveh come. An' when he don't, I'll tell you why he leff'n Grass Riveh, Kansas, for the Fillippians."

CHAPTER XIX

The "Fighting Twentieth"

Malolos and Bocaue's trenches know the Kansas yell;
San Fernando and San Tomas the Kansas story swell;
At Guiguinto's fiercest battle yon flag in honor flew;
What roaring rifles kept it, all Luna's army knew;
And high it swung o'er Caloocan, Bagbag and Marilao—
"Those raggedy Pops from Kansas," 'fore God they're heroes now.

—Lieutenant-Colonel E. C. Little.

NIGHT had fallen on the city of Manila. Before it lay the bay whose waters lapped softly against pier and shipping. Behind it in the great arc of a circle stretched the American line of military outposts, guarded by sentinels. Beyond that line, north, east, and south, there radiated a tangle of roads and trails through little villages of nipa huts, past rice fields and jungles, marshes and rivers, into the very heart of Luzon. Manila was under American military government, but Luzon was in insurrection against all government, and a network of rebellious lines of enemies fretted every jungle, hid in every village, intrenched itself in every rice field, and banked its earthworks beyond every river. While Emilio Aguinaldo, the shrewd leader of an ignorant, half-savage peasantry, plotted craftily with his associates for the seizure of the rich capital of Luzon and dreamed of the autocratic power and heaps of looted treasure that he should soon control.

For weeks in sight of the American outposts, the Filipinos had strengthened their trenches, and established their fortifications, the while they bided the hour of outbreak

and slaughter of the despised Americanos, and the seizing of the rich booty afterward.

Upon the Tondo road, running north from Manila to Caloocan, Thaine Aydelot, with a Kansas University comrade, was doing silent sentinel duty. The outpost was nearly a mile away from a bridge on the outskirts of Manila. In the attack imminent, this bridge would be one of the keys to the city, and the command had been given to hold it against all invaders at any cost.

Between Thaine and the bridge was a stretch of dusty road, flanked on one side by nipa huts. On the other side were scattered dwellings, tall shrubbery, and low-lying rice fields, beyond which lay the jungle.

Before the young sentinel the road made a sharp bend, cutting off the view and giving no hint to the enemy around this bend of how strong a force might be filling the road toward the bridge.

Thaine knew that around that bend and behind the rice dykes and in the nearby trenches were Filipino insurgents with finger on the trigger ready to begin an assault. But until the first gun of the first battle is fired, battle seems impossible to the young soldier.

As Thaine turned from the dim road, he caught the glint of starlight on the edge of a rice swamp. He wanted to fight Filipinos tonight, not memories. But the memory of the Aydelot grove and the water lilies opening their creamy hearts to the moonlight, and Leigh Shirley in her white dress with her cheeks faintly pink in the clear shadows, all swept his mind and challenged him to forget everything else.

The same grip on a principle, coupled with a daring

spirit and love of adventure that had brought old Jean Aydelot to the Virginia colony long ago, and had pushed Francis Aydelot across the Alleghanies into the forests of the Ohio frontier, and had called Asher Aydelot to the unconquered prairies of the big West — the same love of adventure and daring spirit and belief in a cause bigger than his own interests had lured Thaine Aydelot on to the islands of Oriental seas. With the military schooling and unschooling where discipline tends to make a soldier, and absence of home influence tends to make the careless rowdy, the sterling uprightness of the Aydelots and the inborn gentility of the Thaines kept the boy from the Kansas prairies a fearless gentleman. Withal, he was exuberantly pleased with life, as a young man of twenty-one should be. He lived mostly in the company of Kansas University men, and with the old University yell of "Rock Chalk! Jay Hawk! K U!" for their slogan, they stood shoulder to shoulder in every conflict.

Lastly, he was a hero-worshiper at the shrine of his colonel, Fred Funston, and his captain, Adna Clarke; while in all the regiment, the fair face of young Lieutenant Alford seemed to him most gracious. Alford was his soldier ideal, type of the best the battlefield may know. And, even if all this admiration did have in it much of youthful sentimentalism, it took nothing from his efficiency when he came to his place on the firing line.

"I wonder where Doctor Carey is tonight," Thaine's comrade said in a low voice, as the two came together in the road.

"What's made you think of him?" Thaine asked.

"I haven't seen him since Christmas day. A young

Filipino and I got into a scrap with a drunken Chinaman who was beating a boy, and the Chink slashed us both. Carey stitched us up, but the other fellow keeps a scar across his face, all right."

"I know that Filipino," Thaine said. "He seems like a fine young man. The scar was a marker for him. I'd know him by it anywhere."

"So should I, and by his peculiar gait. I saw a man slipping along beyond the lines just now who made me think of that fellow, and that made me think of Doctor Carey," the sentinel said, and turned away.

It was after nine o'clock, and the hours were already beginning to stretch wearily for sentinels, when a faint sound of guns away to the eastward broke on the air. Again and again it came, intermittently at first, but increasing to a steady roar. Down in Manila there was dead quiet, but along the American line of outposts the ripping of Mauser bullets and long streaks of light flashed the Filipino challenge to war in steady volleys.

As Thaine listened, the firing seemed to be creeping gradually toward the north, and he knew the insurgents were swinging toward the Tondo road, down which they would rush to storm the bridge. In that moment civil life dropped off like a garment, and he stood up a soldier. He crept cautiously toward the bend to see what lay beyond, and dropped on his face in the dusty way as a whirl of bullets split the air above his head.

As he sprang back to his place beside his comrade, other sentinels joined them, and behind them loomed the tall form of Captain Clarke.

"What's around there, Aydelot?" Clarke asked.

"Didn't you hear?"

Thaine's reply was lost in a roar of rifles, followed by increased firing along the entire line, massing to the north before the Twentieth's front.

"There are ten more men on the way up here. We'll hold this place until reinforcements come," Captain Clarke declared.

It was such a strategic point as sometimes turns the history of war. But the odds are heavy for sixteen men to stand against swarms of insurgents armed with Mausers and Remingtons. In the thrill of that moment, Thaine Aydelot would have died by inches had this tall, cool-headed captain of his demanded it. Clarke arranged his men on either side of the way, and the return fire began. Suddenly up the road a lantern gleamed. An instant later a cannon shot plowed the dust between the two lines of men.

"They've turned a cannon loose. Watch out," Clarke called through the darkness.

A second time and a third the lantern glowed, and each time a cannon ball crashed through a nipa hut beside the little company, or threw a shower of dust about the place.

They have to load that gun by the light of a lantern. Let's fix the lantern," Thaine cried, as the dust cloud settled down.

"Good! Watch your aim, boys," Captain Clarke replied.

The bullets were falling thick about them. They whizzed through the bushes, they cut into the thatched huts, they flung swirls of dust on the little line of brave soldiers, they poured like stinging sweeps of hail, volley after volley, along the Tondo road. When the lantern flashed again,

sixteen bullets riddled it, and without its help the big gun was useless.

"Poor lantern! It fell on the firing line, brave to the last," Thaine declared as the smoke lifted.

But the loss of the cannon only doubled the insurgents' efforts, and they threshed at the invincible little band with smoking lead. On the one side was a host of Filipino rebels, believing by the incessant firing of the Kansans that it was facing an equal host. On the other side were sixteen men who, knowing the odds against them, dared the game of war to the limit.

"How many rounds have you left?" Captain Clarke asked.

"Only one," came the answer.

"Give it to them when I give the word. We won't run till our guns are empty," the captain declared grimly.

The last shot was ready to fly, when a wild yell burst from the darkness behind them, the shouts to "remember the *Maine*," mingled with the old university yell of "Rock Chalk, Jay Hawk, K. U. oo!" and reinforcements charged to the relief of the invincible sixteen.

What disaster might have followed the capture of the Tondo road and the attack upon the bridge is only conjecture. What did happen is history — type henceforth of that line of history every company of the Twentieth Kansas was to help to build. When daylight came, Thaine Aydelot saw the frontier line that he had proudly felt himself called hither to push back, and the reality of it was awful. He had pictured captured trenches, but he had not put in their decoration — the prone forms of dead Filipinos with staring eyes, seeing nothing earthly any more forever.

Beyond that line, however, lay the new wilderness that the Anglo-American must conquer, and he flung himself upon the firing line, as if the safety and honor of the American nation rested on his shoulders alone; while all his dreams of glorious warfare, where Greek meets Greek in splendid gallantry, faded out before the actual warfare of the days and nights that followed.

Thaine's regiment, not the "Kansas Scarecrows," but the "Fighting Twentieth" now, was one of the regiments on which rested the brunt of driving back and subduing the rebellious Filipinos. Swiftly the Kansas boys pushed into the unknown country north of Manila. They rushed across the rice fields, whose low dykes gave little protection from the enemy. They plunged through marshes, waist deep in water. They lay for hours behind their earthworks, half buried in muddy slime. They slept in holes, drenched to the skin. With the University yell for their battle cry of freedom, they tore through tropical jungles with the bullets of the enemy cutting the branches overhead or spattering the dirt about their feet.

The American regiments were six days in reaching Caloocan, a prosperous town only six miles north of Manila; a mile a day, every foot stubbornly contested.

On Sabbath morning in the first day's struggle, Thaine was running in a line of soldiery toward the Filipino fortification, when he was halted beside a thatched hut that stood between the guns of both armies and was riddled with bullets.

"Help the corporal here, Aydelot, then double quick it ahead," Lieutenant Krause commanded.

Thaine followed the corporal inside the hut where, shot

to pieces, lay the mangled forms of women and children who had caught the storm of bullets from both firing lines. Through a gaping hole in the wall beyond, he saw a shallow pit where wounded and dead men and women were huddled together.

"Help me get out the live ones and send them back to Manila, and we'll cover the others right here," the corporal declared.

It was the neighborhood custom of the Grass River Valley for young men to assist at every funeral. Thaine had jokingly dubbed himself "official neighborhood pall-bearer," and had served at so many funerals that the service had become merely one of silent dignity which he forgot the next hour. He knew just how to place the flowers effectively, when to step aside and wait, and when to come forward and take hold. And these were the only kinds of services he had known for the dead.

As he bent over the blood-smeared bodies to take up the wounded and dying now, the horror of war burst upon him, and no dead face could be more ashy gray than the young soldier's face as he lifted it above a dying Filipino woman whom he stretched tenderly beside the hut. The next victim way a boy, a deserter from Manila, whom Thaine recognized by a scar across his cheek as the young Filipino whose wound Doctor Carey had dressed.

"You poor fellow!" Thaine said softly.

The boy's eyes opened in recognition.

"For liberty," he murmured in Spanish, with a scowling face. Then the scowl faded to a smile, and in a moment more he had entered eternal liberty.

A detachment of the Red Cross with a white-haired sur-

geon just then relieved the corporal of the wounded, and Thaine saw Dr. Horace Carey coming toward him.

"I know what you are thinking. Maybe your gun did a good deal of it. This is war, Thaine."

The young man's dark eyes burned with agony at the thought.

"Forget it," Carey added hurriedly. "It is the lost cause here. I worked that line myself for four years long ago. I know the feeling. But this is the only medicine to give the islands here. They can't manage liberty for themselves. You are giving them more freedom with your rifle today than they could get for themselves in a century. Don't wet your powder with your tears. You may need it for the devil that's after you now. Wait till you see a Kansas boy brought in and count the cost again. Good-by."

The doctor hastened away with the wounded, and Thaine helped to straighten out the forms about him and to fill the pit where they were placed in one common grave.

"Wait till you see a Kansas boy brought in and then count the cost."

Somehow, the words, ringing again and again down his mind, could not take away the picture of the thing he had just witnessed. And the dying gasp, "For liberty!" seemed to stab his soul, as he ran forward.

Two days later his company had orders to hold the trenches before a jungle filled with sharpshooters. All day the sun had blazed down upon them and the humid atmosphere had scalded them. All day the murderous "ping! ping!" of the hidden Mauser in the jungle had stung the air about them.

Late in the afternoon Thaine lay crouched behind his

low defense with a college comrade on either side. Colonel Funston had just given the command to rid the woods of the sharpshooters, and the force ordered to the attack came racing by. Captain Clarke stood near Thaine's post, and as the soldiers rushed forward, Lieutenant Alford halted beside him. Even in the thrill of the hour, the private down in the trenches felt a sense of bigger manhood as he looked at the young officer, for Alford was every inch a king; his soldier uniform became him like a robe of royalty. His fine face was aglow now with the enthusiasm of the battle and the assurance of victory.

Thaine did not hear the words of the two officers, for the jungle was beginning to roar with battle cries and bursting fire from many guns. But he knew the two had been boyhood friends, university chums, and military comrades, and the love of man for man shone in their faces.

Alford tarried but a moment with Clarke. As he spied Thaine and his comrades, he gave an instant's glance of kindly recognition to the admiring young privates, and was gone. The three involuntarily rose to their feet, as if to follow him, and from three lusty throats they sent after him the beloved battle yell of the regiment, "Rock Chalk! Jay Hawk! K. U.!" then dropped to their places again and hugged the earth as the rifle balls whizzed about them.

"I'm glad I'm alive and I'm glad I know that man," Thaine said to his neighbors.

"Alford's a prince. I'll bet he'll clean that woods before he's through. His work is always well done. Would you listen to that?" his comrade replied.

A tremendous crash of rifle shots seemed to split the jungle as the Kansas troops charged into it. The men

in the trenches lay flat to the earth while the balls fell about them or sang a long whining note through the air over them. Fiercer grew the fray, and louder roared the guns, and wilder the bullets flew, as the fighting lines swept over the enemy's earthworks and struck with deadly force into the heart of its wooded cover.

Then came a lull for shifting the fighting grip. A relief force was hurried to the front and the first companies retired for a brief rest. They fell back in order, while the aids came trooping out of the brush in groups, bearing the wounded to places of shelter. Thaine Aydelot and his comrades lifted their heads above the earthworks for an instant. Captain Clarke sat near on a little knoll staring hard at a stretcher borne toward him by the aids. The manner of covering indicated a dead body on it.

"How different the captain's face is from what it was before the attack," Thaine thought, as he recalled the moment when Clarke had talked with Lieutenant Alford. And then the image of the young lieutenant's face, so full of life and hope and power and gentleness, swept vividly across his mind.

"Who is it, boys?" Clarke called to the soldiers with the stretcher.

"Lieutenant Alford," they answered.

Something black dropped before Thaine Aydelot's eyes and Doctor Carey's words stung like powder burns in his memory.

"Wait till you see a Kansas boy brought in, and count the cost again."

In civil life character builds slowly up to higher levels. In war, it leaps upward in an instant. Thaine sprang to

his feet and stood up to his full height in the blaze of the tropical sunshine. He did not see his captain, who had dropped to the ground like a wounded thing, stabbed to the soul with an agony of sorrow. He did not see the still form of the young lieutenant outlined under the cover of the stretcher. He did not see the trenches nor the lines of khaki-clad, sun-browned soldiery plunging forward to rid the jungle of its deadly peril. In that one moment he looked down the years with clear vision, as his father, Asher Aydelot, had learned to look before him, and he saw manhood and a new worth in human deeds. He had been a sentimental dreamer, ambitious for honors fairly earned, and eager for adventure. The first shots in the night attack on the Tondo road made him a soldier. The martyrdom of Lieutenant Alford made him a patriot. Humanity must be worth much, it seemed to him, if, in the providence of God, such blood must be spilled to redeem it to nobler civilization.

Six weeks after the death of Alford before Caloocan, Dr. Horace Carey came up from the hospital in Manila to the American line to see Thaine Aydelot. The Kansas boys had been on duty in the trenches north of Caloocan for forty days, living beside the breastworks under the rude shelter of bamboo poles, watching a sleepless enemy — a life as full of wearing monotony and hardship as it was full of constant peril.

"Well, Thaine, how goes the game?" Carey asked, as he sat beside the young soldier from the Grass River Valley. "I helped you into this world. I'm glad I haven't had to help you out yet."

Carey had never before seen any resemblance to Asher

Aydelot in his son's face. It was purely a type of the old Thaine family of Virginia. But today, the pose of the head, the expression of the mouth, the far-seeing gaze of the dark eyes, bespoke the heritage of the house of Aydelot.

"I hope not to have any more help from you, either. You got me into the scrape; I'll see to the rest," Thaine replied. "Don't I look all right? I haven't had a bath, except in swamp mud, since the first of February. Today is the twenty-third of March. Neither have I seen a razor. Notice my silky beard. Nor a dress suit, nor a—anything else civilized. Six weeks in one hole, killing Filipinos for our amusement and dodging their old Remingtons for theirs, living on army rations and respect for the flag of my country, may not improve my appearance, but it hasn't started me to the sick-shack yet. Any news from home?" Thaine ended with the question put so carelessly, with a face so impenetrable that Doctor Carey took notice at once.

"Homesick!" was his mental diagnosis, but he answered with equal carelessness.

"Yes, I had a letter from Leigh Shirley."

Thaine's eyes were too full of unspeakable things now for him to hold out.

"She says the alfalfa is doing well. She and Jim have kept up all the interest, and are beginning to reduce the principal. That's why she wrote."

"Brave little soldier," Thaine muttered.

"Yes, civil life has its heroes, too," the doctor responded. "She also says," he continued, "that John Jacobs has had Hans Wyker convicted of running a joint and Hans had to pay a fine and stick in the Careyville jail thirty days. Hans won't love John for that when he gets out."

"What a hater of whisky John Jacobs is. He's always on the firing line and never misses his aim, bless him!" Thaine declared.

"Yes, Jacobs' battle is a steady one. He told me just before I left Kansas how his mother was killed in a saloon in Cincinnati when she was trying to get his father out of it. John wouldn't live in a state that had no prohibitory law," the doctor commented.

"Did Leigh write anything else?" Thaine asked.

"Yes. Jo Bennington and Todd Stewart are married. Pryor Gaines is in Pekin, and he writes that there are rumblings of trouble over there. Shall we go over and settle it when we finish the Filipino fuss?"

"Might as well. I'd like to see old Pryor. I'm glad Todd and Jo had sense enough to take each other. I suppose Jo overcame her notions of living only in the city. What else?" Thaine replied.

"Nothing else. That's your message." Carey's black eyes held a shrewd twinkle.

"Why mine?" The impenetrable face was on Thaine again.

"See here, boy, don't think I haven't read her story, page by page. If Leigh had sent you a single line, I'd have begun to doubt."

Thaine threw one arm about the doctor's shoulder and said not a word. Then Carey read his story also.

"I nearly forgot to tell you that Leigh is doing well with her drawings. She sent me this, for which she had a good price paid her."

Doctor Carey unfolded the paper back of a magazine having a bit of prairie landscape for a cover design. In

the distance, three headlands swam in the golden haze of a Kansas October sunset, and their long purple shadows fell wide across the brown prairie and fields of garnered harvests.

Thaine studied it carefully, but offered no comment.

"Doctor Carey, what brought you to the Philippines?" he asked suddenly.

"To look after you," Carey replied frankly.

"Me! Do I need it?"

"You may. In that case I'll be first aid to the injured," Carey answered. "I'm to go with the 'Fighting Twentieth' when it starts out of these hog wallows toward the insurgents' capital. I must get back to Manila and pack for it. I have my orders to be ready in twenty-four hours."

In twenty-four hours the "Fighting Twentieth" left its six-weeks' habitation in the trenches and began its campaign northward, and the young-hearted, white-haired physician with magnetic smile and skillful judgment found a work in army service so broad and useful that he loved it for its opportunity.

Fortunately, Thaine had no need for "first aid" from Doctor Carey, and he saw the doctor only rarely in the sixty days that followed. When the two had time for each other again, Colonel Fred Funston's name had been written round the world in the annals of military achievement, the resourceful, courageous, beloved leader of a band of fighters from the Kansas prairies who were never defeated, never driven back, never daunted by circumstances. Great were the pen of that historian that could fittingly set forth all the deeds of daring and acts of humanity of every com-

pany under every brave captain, for they "all made history, and left records of unfading glory."

The regiment had reached the Rio Grande, leaving no unconquered post behind it. Under fire, it had forded the Tulijan, shoulder-deep to the shorter men. Under fire, it had forged a way through Guiguinto and Malolos. Under fire, it had swam the Marilao and the Bagbag. And now, beyond Calumpit, the flower of Aguinaldo's army was massed under General Luna, north of the Rio Grande. A network of strong fortifications lay between it and the river, and it commanded all the wide water-front.

As the soldiers waited orders on the south side of the river, Doctor Horace Carey left his work and sought out Thaine's company, impelled by the same instinct that once turned him from the old Sunflower Trail to find Virginia Aydelot lost on the solitary snow-covered prairie beyond Little Wolf Creek.

"What's before you now?" the doctor asked, as he and Thaine sat on the ground together.

"The Rio Grande now. We must be nearly to the end if we rout General Luna here," Thaine replied.

"You've stood it well. I guess you don't need me after all," Carey remarked.

"I always need you, Doctor Carey," Thaine said earnestly. "Never more than now. When I saw Captain Clarke wounded and carried away on the other side of the Tulijan, and could only say 'Captain, my captain,' I needed you. When Captain Elliot was killed, I needed you; and when Captain William Watson was shot and wouldn't stay dead because we need him so, and when Metcalf, Bishop, Agnew, Glasgow, Ramsey, and Martin, and

all the other big-brained fellows do big things, I need you again. Life is a great game; I'm glad I'm in it."

Horace Carey had never before seen Thaine's bright face so alert with manly power and beauty and thoughtfulness. War had hardened him. Danger had tried him. Human needs, larger than battle lines alone can know, had strengthened him. Vision of large purposes had uplifted him. As he stood before the white-haired physician whom he had loved from earliest memory, Carey murmured to himself:

"Can the world find grander soldiers to fight its battles than these sun-browned boys from our old Kansas prairies?"

"We are going across to Luna's stronghold in a few minutes. Watch him go into eclipse before Fred Funston. If you stand right here, you'll see me helping at the job. Goodby," Thaine declared, and, at the bugle call, fell into his place.

Beyond the river a steady fire was opened on the American forces, and no bridge nor boat was there by which to cross. Doctor Carey stood watching the situation with a strange sense of unrest in his mind.

"There must be rafts," declared Colonel Funston.

And there were rafts, hastily made of bamboo poles.

"Somebody must swim across and fasten a cable over there by which to tow the rafts across. Who will volunteer? You see what's before you," Funston asserted.

Horace Carey saw two soldiers, Corporal Trembly and Private Edward White, seize the cable, plunge into the river, and strike out directly toward the farther side filled with Filipino forces. Rifle balls split the water about them.

Bullet after bullet cut the air above them. Shot after shot from the ambushed enemy hurtled toward them. The two young men surged steadily ahead, bent only on reaching the bank and fastening the cable. They knew only one word, duty, and they did the thing they had agreed to do. Once across the river, they ran nimbly up the bank and made fast the rope's end, while cheer after cheer rose from their comrades watching them, and the battle cry of the Fighting Twentieth, "Rock Chalk, Jay Hawk, K. U.," went pulsing out across the waters of the Rio Grande as full and strong as in the days when it rolled out on the university campus on far-away Mount Oread, beside the Kaw.

The rafts sped along the cable, and squad after squad went pell mell into General Luna's stronghold, under stubborn fire from the frantic rebels.

Thaine Aydelot was on the last raft to cross the river. Doctor Carey watched with eager gaze as the last men reached the farther bank. He saw them scrambling up from the water's edge. He saw Thaine turn back to lift up a comrade blinded, but not injured, by the smoke of a gun. He saw the two start forward. Then the faint "ping" of a Mauser came to his ears, and Thaine threw up his hands and fell backward into the water and sank from sight, while the other soldiers, unknowing, rushed forward into battle.

For a moment, Horace Carey stood like a statue, then he sprang into the river and swam against the fire of the hidden foe to where Thaine Aydelot had disappeared. Ten minutes later, while Luna's forces were trying vainly to resist the daring Americans, Thaine Aydelot lay on a raft

which Carey, with a Red Cross aid, was pulling toward the south bank.

When the Fighting Twentieth soldiers were relieved from service, and turned their faces gladly toward the Kansas prairies, whither hundreds of proud fathers and mothers and wives and sweethearts were waiting to give eager, happy welcome, Thaine Aydelot lay hovering between life and death in the hospital at Manila. The white-haired doctor who had saved him from the waters of the Rio Grande watched hourly beside him, relying not so much on the ministrations of his calling as in his trust in an Infinite Father, through whom at last the sick may be made whole.

CHAPTER XX

The Crooked Trail

Life may be given in many ways,
And loyalty to truth be sealed
As bravely in the closet as the field.
—Lowell.

"HERE'S yo' letter from the Fillippians, Mis' Virginia; Mr. Champers done bring hit for you all." Boanerges Peeperville fairly danced into the living room of the Sunflower Inn. "They ain't no black mournin' aidge bindin' it round nuthah, thank the good Lawd foh that."

Virginia Aydelot opened the letter with trembling fingers. It was only a brief page, but the message on it was big with comfort for her.

"It is from Horace," she said, as her eyes followed the lines. "He was with Thaine when he wrote it. Thaine is perfectly well again and busy as ever. He and Horace seem to be needed over there yet awhile. Isn't it wonderful how Thaine ever lived through that dreadful bullet wound and fever?"

"I jus' wondeh how you all stand up undeh such 'flictions. Seems to me a motheh done wilt down, but they don't. Mothehs is the bravest things they is," Bo Peep declared with a broad grin of admiration.

"Oh, we get schooled to it. Asher's mother waited through six years while he was in army service; and remember how long I waited in Virginia for him to come back to me! I wondered at the test of my endurance then. I

know now it was to prepare me for Thaine's time of service for his country."

"I done remember, all right, 'bout that time in ol' Virginia, an' the day I taken you the letteh up in the little glen behind the ol' mansion house whah hit wah so cool and the watah's so cleah. Misteh Horace wah home that day, too. Say, Mis' Virginia, did — did he done mention my name anywhar in that letteh?"

The pathos of the dark face was pitiful.

"'My best love to Bo Peep.'" Virginia pointed to the line as she read.

"Kin I please have this huh envelope?" Bo Peep pleaded, and, clutching it as a sacred treasure, he said: "Mis' Virginia, didn't I done tellen you Misteh Thaine would come back?"

"How did you know?" Virginia asked with shining eyes.

"Becuz of what Doctoh Horace lef' for me to tell you. It cain't do no hahm to tell hit thus fah."

Bo Peep hesitated, and Virginia looked curiously at him.

"Doctor Horace won't never come back. I tol' you that sufficiency times. When he lef', he say, 'Tel Mis' Virginia, if I don't come back, I'se done goin' to be with Misteh Thaine an' take care of him, 'cause I love the boy, — hit cain't do no hahm to tell you that while Misteh Horace still writen to us. An' didn't he tak' care of Misteh Thaine? Didn't he lef' his place an' go down to that Rigrand Riveh, an' didn't he see Misteh Thaine fall back with a bullet pushin' him right into the watah? Yes, an' be drownded if Doctoh Horace hadn't done swum right then and fish him out. An' didn't he stay night time

an' day time right by the blessed boy, till he's pullin' him out of dangeh of death's wing? Oh, yo' son done comin' back 'cause Misteh Horace say he sho' goin' jus' tak' care of him."

"But, Bo Peep, why do you not believe we'll have Horace here again?" Virginia asked.

The black man only shook his head mournfully as he answered determinedly, "Ef yo' saves a life, you has to give one for hit, mos' eveh time, an' mo' specially in the Fillippians whah they's so murderful and slaughterous."

"Oh, you ought not think that way," Virginia urged. "Run quick, now, and take the news to Asher. I don't know where he is this morning."

"He's talkin' to Mr. Dahley Champehs out to the barn," Bo Peep said as he hurried away.

Asher Aydelot was standing before the big barn doors when Darley Champers turned from the main road and drove into the barnyard. It was a delicious April morning, with all the level prairie lands smiling back at the skies above them, and every breath of the morning breeze bearing new vigor and inspiration in its caressing touch.

"Good morning, Champers; fine morning to live," Asher called out cheerily.

"Mornin', Aydelot; fine day, fine! Miss Shirley told me last fall she got her first inspiration for buyin' a quarter of land with nothin' and faith, and makin' it pay for itself, out of one of Coburn's Agricultural Reports. I reckon if a book like that could inspire a woman, they's plenty in a mornin' like this to inspire old Satan to a more uprighteous line of goods than he generally carries. I never see the country look better. Your wheat is tre-

mendous. How's the country look to you?" Champers responded.

"I can remember when it looked a good deal worse," Asher replied. "The Coburn Reports must have helped to turn bare prairie and weedy boom lots into harvest fields."

The two men had seated themselves on the sloping driveway before the barn doors. Asher was chewing the tender joint of a spear of foxtail grass, and Champers had lighted a heavy cigar.

"You don't smoke, I believe," he said cordially, "or I'd insist on offering the mate."

"No, I just chew," Asher replied, as he bent the foxtail thoughtfully in his fingers and looked out toward the wheat fields already rippling like waves under the morning breeze.

"Say, Aydelot, do you remember the day I come down this valley and tried my danged best to get you to sell out for a song? I've done some pretty scaly things, all inside the letter of the law, since then, but never anything that's stuck in my craw like that. I guess you ain't forgot it, neither?"

"I remember more of those first years than of these later ones, and I haven't forgotten when you came to the Grass River schoolhouse one hot Sunday about grasshopper time, but I don't believe anybody holds it against you. You were out for business just as we were," Asher replied with a genial smile.

"Say! D'recollect what you said to me when I invited you to cast your glims over this very country, a burnt-up old prairie that day, so scorched it was too dry and hot to cut up into town lots for an addition to Hades?"

Asher laughed now.

"No, I don't remember anything about that. It was just the general line of events that stayed with me," he said.

"Well, I do; and I'll never forget the look in your eyes when you said it, neither. I'd told you, as I say, just to look at this God-forsaken old plain and tell me what you see. And you looked, like you was glimpsin' heaven a'most, and just said sorter solemn like an' prophetic: 'I see a land fair as the Garden of Eden, with grazing herds on broad meadows, and fields on fields of wheat, and groves and little lakes and rivers — a land of comfortable homes and schoolhouses and churches, and no saloons nor breweries.' And then I broke in and told you I see a danged fool, and you says, 'Come down here in twenty-five year and make a hunt for me then.' And, by golly, Aydelot, here I am. You've everlastingly conquered the prairies for sure, and you are a young man, not fifty-five yet."

"Well, you can see most of those things that I saw that day out yonder, can't you?"

Asher's eyes followed the waving young wheat and the blossoming orchards, the grove, full of birds' songs, and the line of Grass River running deeper year by year. Then he looked at his hard, brown hands and thought of the toil and faith and hope that had gone into the conquest.

"Yes, I'm still among the middle-aged," he said, straightening with his habitual military dignity of bearing. "But I don't know about this everlasting conquest of the prairies. There's still some of it waiting over beyond those headlands in the open range where John Jacobs has a big holding. I'll never feel that I have conquered until my boy proves himself in civil life as well as on the battle-

field. If I can bring him back when he is through with the Orient, then, Darley Champers, I will have done something beside subdue the soil. Through him, I'll *keep* the wilderness from ever getting hold again. If we live so narrowly that our children hate the lines we follow and will not go on and do still bigger things than we have done, do we really make a success of life?"

At that moment Bo Peep appeared with Doctor Carey's letter, and the subject shifted to the problems of the far East.

"We aren't the only people who are having trouble," Asher said. "I read in the papers that the Boxer uprising that began in southern China last year is spreading northward and making no end of disturbance."

"What's them Boxers wantin'? Are they a band of prize ring fellers?" Darley Champers asked.

"Pryor Gaines writes Jim Shirley that they are a secret order of fanatics bent on stamping out all Christianity and all western ideas of advancement in the Orient. Things begin to look ugly in China, even from this distance. When a band of religious fanatics like the Boxers go on the warpath, their atrocities make a Cheyenne raid or a Kiowa massacre look like a football game. I hope Pryor will not be in their line of march."

"Pryor Gaines'd better stayed right here. It's what's likely to happen to a man who goes missionarying too far, and we could 'a used him here."

It was an unusual concession for Darley Champers to make regarding the church, and Asher looked keenly at him.

"Say, Aydelot," Champers said suddenly, "you have more influence with John Jacobs 'n anybody else, I know.

If you see the Jew, pass it on to him that Wyker's at his old cut-ups again over in Wykerton, and he's danged bitter against Jacobs. I can help him on the side like I did before, but the Jew's got hold of enough over there now to run things, with ownin' land all round and holdin' mortgages on town property just to keep joints out of 'em. I do no end of business for Jacobs now. Never had dealin's with a straighter man. But he'd better look out for Wyker. The Dutchman's insides is all green with poison, he's hated Jacobs so many years."

"I guess John will make it hard on him if they come to blows again. The jail sentence and fine Jacobs fastened on him let Wyker down easy. John Jacobs is one of the state's big men," Asher responded.

"We lost another big man when we let Doc Carey go," Champers went on. "I used to set up nights and rest myself hatin' him. He done the biggest missionary work in me the two weeks I stayed at his house ever was done for a benighted heathen. I hated to see him go." The sadness of the tone was genuine. "But I mustn't be hangin' round here all the mornin'; I've got other things to do. Hope your boy'll keep a-goin' till his term's out. Goodday!" And Champers was gone.

"Till his term's out!" Asher repeated with a smile. "Wouldn't that six-footer of a soldier boy, whose patriotism burns like a furnace, see the joke to that! Till he gets his stripes off and forgets the lock-step! My Thaine, who is giving a young man's strength of body and inspiration of soul to his country's service! But Carey did do a missionary work in Champers. The fellow was crooked enough 'inside the law always,' as he said, but no more out

of line than scores of reputable business men are today. And the fact that he's Jacobs' agent now measures the degree of trustworthiness Carey has helped to waken in him."

Darley Champers' business took him down the river to the Cloverdale Ranch, where he found Leigh Shirley training the young vines up the trellis by the west porch.

"You got a mighty pretty place here; just looks like Jim Shirley," Champers declared as he greeted the young gardener.

"Yes, Uncle Jim is never so happy as when he is puttering about the lawn and garden," Leigh answered.

"How's your alfalfa doin'?" Champers asked as he turned toward the level stretch of rich green alfalfa fields. "Danged money-maker for you," he added jovially.

"We'll clear the place with the first cutting this year. It's just the thing for Uncle Jim," Leigh asserted.

"Yep, Jim's in clover—alfalfa, ruther. You had a good business head when you run your bluff some years ago, an' you wan't only nineteen then. You walked into my place an' jest bought that land on sheer bluff." Champers laughed uproariously, but he grew sober in the next minute.

"Miss Shirley," he said gravely, "I ain't got much style nor sentiment in my makin's, but I've honestly tried to be humane by widders an' orphans. I've done men to keep 'em from doin' me, or jest 'cause they was danged easy, but I never wronged no woman, not even my wife, who divorced me years ago back East 'cause I wouldn't turn my old mother out o' doors, but kep' her and provided for her long as she lived."

Nobody in Kansas had ever heard Darley Champers mention his home relations before. Leigh looked at him gravely, and the sympathy in her deep blue eyes was grateful to the uncultured man before her.

"Miss Shirley, I ain't wantin' to meddle none, but I come down here to ask you if you know anything about your father?"

Leigh gave a start and stared at her questioner, but her woman's instinct told her that only kindly purpose lay back of his question.

He had sat down on the edge of the porch and Leigh stood leaning against the trellis, clutching the narrow slats, as she looked at him.

"I think he is dead," she answered slowly. "Uncle Jim says he must be. He was a bad man, made bad not by blood but by selfishness. The Shirleys are a fine family."

"Excuse me for sayin' it, Miss, but you took every good trait of that family, an' Nature jest shied every bad trait as far from you as it took the sins of our old savage Anglo-Saxon ancestors off of our heads; them that used to kill an' eat their neighborin' tribes, like the Filipinos, they was. Don't never forget that you're a Shirley an' not a Tank. Your grandma's name was Tank, I've been told."

Leigh made no response, but something in her face and in the poise of her figure bespoke the truth of Darley Champers' words.

"I jest come down to tell you," he continued, "that the man I represented when I sold you this quarter, he represented your father, Tank Shirley, and Tank got it

through this man away from Jim out of pure hate. I sold it back to you out of pure spite to Tank's agent, who was naggin' me. If your father is dead, there'd ought to be somethin' comin' back, as the money you paid for the land would help you some if we could get it back. I come as a friend. I'm kinder in Doc Carey's shoes while he's gone, you see. You've got the land as good as paid for. It will be clear, you say, by June. Buyin' it of your own father, if there's any estate left of him, you'd ought to have it. Money's always a handy commodity, an' I'd like to see you git what's your'n after your plucky bluff and winnin'. You could use it, I reckon?"

"We need it very much," Leigh assured him.

"Say, would you mind tellin' me if you find out anything about your father's whereabouts or anything?" Champers queried.

"Yes, I will," Leigh replied, "but will you tell me what you know about him; you must know something?"

It was Champers' turn to start now. "N-not much; not as much as I'm goin' to know, and it's not for my profit, neither. I don't make money out of women's needs. I never made a cent on this sale to you, but it was worth it to get to do that agent once," Champers declared.

Leigh waited quietly.

"I'll be in better shape inside of two days to tell you something definite. I wish Carey was here. Do you know where he got the money he loaned you?"

"I never asked him," Leigh answered.

"He borrowed it of Miss Jane Aydelot of Cloverdale, Ohio."

Champers did not mean to be brutal, but the sharp cry

of pain and the look of anguish on Leigh Shirley's face told how grievous was the wound his words had made.

"Why, you paid it all back; she ain't lost nothin'. Besides, I heard with my own ears folks sayin' she'd always loved you and it was a pity Jim ever took you away from her. She might 'a done well by you, they said. You got no wrong due. Lord knows you've paid it conscientiously enough," Darley Champers insisted.

"Mr. Champers, will you be sure to tell me all you know as soon as possible? Meantime, I'll try to find out something to tell you."

"I sure will. Goodday to you."

When Champers rose to leave, Leigh put out her hand to him, and the winning smile that made all Grass River folk love her as they loved her uncle Jim now touched the best spot in the heart of the man before her.

"God knows it's a lot better to do for folks than to *do* 'em, and in the end I believe you prosper more at it. My business, except the infernal boom days, never was so good as it's been since I had that time with Carey, and it's all clean business, too, not a smirch on it. Wish I could forget a few things I've did, though." So Darley Champers thought, as he drove up the old Grass River trail in the glory of the April morning.

That morning, Leigh Shirley wrote a long letter to Jane Aydelot of Cloverdale, Ohio. Leigh had written many letters to her before, but never one with a plea like this. Miss Jane had mentally grown up with Leigh and had built many a romance about her, which was only hinted at in the letters she received.

In the letter of this morning, Leigh begged for all the

information Miss Jane could give concerning her father, and further, she pleaded boldly for the reconciliation of the Aydelot family, a thing she had never written of before. Five days later her letter came back "unclaimed" with a brief statement from the Cloverdale postmaster that Miss Jane Aydelot had passed away on the day the letter was written, much beloved, etc.

John Jacobs had no need to be warned by Asher Aydelot of Hans Wyker's doings. He knew all of Wyker's movements through Rosie Gimpke. Jacobs had been kind to Rosie, whose bare, loveless life knew few kindnesses, and she harbored the memory of a good deed as her grandfather harbored his hatred. Moreover, the Wyker joint had played havoc with the Gimpke family. Her father had died from a fall received in a drunken brawl there. Two brothers, too drunk to know better, had driven into Little Wolf in a spring flood and been drowned. A sister had married a drinking man who regularly beat her in his regular sprees. For a heavy-footed, heavy-brained, fat German girl, Rosie Gimpke could get into action with surprising alacrity for the safety of one who had shown her a kindness.

And it was Rosie Gimpke, whom John Jacobs called the Wykerton W. C. T. U., who swiftly put the word to him that her grandfather was again defying the law and menacing the public welfare.

Unfortunately, the messenger who served Rosie in this emergency was overtaken by Hans and forced to divulge his mission, threatened with dire evils if he said a word to Rosie about Hans having halted him, and urged to go with all haste on his errand, and to be sure of the reward, a

ticket to the coming circus and two dishes of ice cream from the Wyker eating house, as per Rosie's promise.

The boy hastened from the grinning Hans and did his errand, and afterward held his peace, so far as Rosie was concerned. But he stupidly unloaded his message and Hans' interference and threats to John Jacobs as an outsider whom the Wyker family rows could not touch, and had another dish of ice cream at Jacobs' expense.

This messenger was able, for he brought the word to Rosie that John Jacobs would come to his Little Wolf ranch the next day, and late in the evening drop into Wykerton unexpectedly, where he knew Rosie would give him easy access to the "blind tiger" of the Wyker House. The boy carried a message also to Darley Champers to meet Jacobs at the top of the hill above Little Wolf where the trail with the scary little twist wound down by the opening to the creek, beyond which the Gimpke home was hidden. Then Hans Wyker, with threats of withholding the circus ticket and the ice cream, was told both messages just as they had been given to him for Rosie and Champers. Hans, for reasons of his own, hurried out of Wykerton and took the first train to Kansas City.

All this happened on the day that Darley Champers had made his trip to the Cloverdale Ranch. The fine spring weather of the morning leaped to summer heat in the afternoon, as often happens in the plains country. On the next day the heat continued, till late in the afternoon a vicious black storm cloud swirled suddenly up over the edge of the horizon, defying the restraining call of the three headlands to sheer off to the south, as storms usually sheered, and burst in fury on the Grass River Valley,

extending east and north until the whole basin drained by Big Wolf was threshed with a cyclone's anger.

Darley Champers sat half asleep in his office on the afternoon of this day. His coat and vest were flung on a chair, his collar was on the floor under the desk, his sleeves were rolled above his elbows. The heat affected his big bulky frame grievously. The front door was closed to keep out the afternoon glare, but the rear door, showing the roomy back yard, was wide open, letting in whatever cool air might wander that way.

Darley was half conscious of somebody's presence as he dozed. He dreamed a minute or two, then suddenly his eyes snapped open just in time to see Thomas Smith entering through the rear doorway.

"How do you do?" The voice was between a whine and a snarl.

Champers stared and said nothing.

"It's too hot to be comfortable," Smith said, seating himself opposite Champers, "but you're looking well."

"You're not," Champers thought.

Thomas Smith was not looking well. Every mark of the down-hill road was on him, to the last and surest mark of poverty. The hang-dog expression of the face with its close-set eyes and crooked scar above them showed how far the evil life had robbed the man of power.

"I got in here yesterday morning, and you went out of town right away," Smith began.

"Yes, I seen you, and left immediately," Champers replied.

"Why do you dodge me? Is it because you know I can throw you? Or is it because I got full here once and beat

you up a bit over in Wyker's place?" Smith asked smoothly, but with something cruel leaping up in his eyes.

"I didn't dodge you. I had business to see to and I hurried to it, so I wouldn't miss you this afternoon," Champers declared. "What do you want now?"

"Money, and I'm going to have it," Smith declared.

"Go get it, then!" Champers said coolly.

"You go get it for me, and go quick," Smith responded. "I'm in a bad fix, I needn't tell you. I've got to have money; it's what I live for."

"I believe you. It's all you ever did live for, and it's brought you where it'll bring any man danged soon enough who lives for it that way," Champers asserted.

"Since when did you join the Young Men's Christian Association?" Smith asked blandly.

"Since day before yesterday."

In spite of himself, Darley Champers felt his face flush deeply. He had just responded to a solicitation from that organization, assuring the solicitors that he "done it as a business man and not that he was any prayer meetin' exhorter, but the dollars was all cleaner'n a millionaire's, anyhow."

"I thought so," Smith went on. "Well, briefly, you have a good many things to keep covered, you know, and, likewise, so have your friends, the Shirleys. The girl paid about all the mortgage on that ranch, I find."

Darley Champers threw up his big hand.

"Don't bring her name in here," he demanded savagely.

"Oh, are you soft that way?" The sneer in the allusion was contemptible. "All the better; you will get me some money right away. Why, I haven't let you favor me

in a long time. You'll be glad to do it now. Let me show you exactly how."

He paused a moment and the two looked steadily at each other, each seeming sure of his ground.

"You will go to these Shirleys," Smith continued, all the hate of years making the name bitter to him, "and you'll arrange that they mortgage up again right away, and you bring me the money. They can easy get three thousand on that ranch now, it's so well set to alfalfa. Nothing else will do but just that."

"And if I don't go?" Darley Champers asked.

"Oh, you'll go. You don't want this Y. M. C. A. crowd to know all I can tell. No, you don't. And Jim Shirley and that girl Leigh don't want me to publish all I know about the father and brother, Tank. It might be hard on both of 'em. Oh, I've got you all there. You can't get away from me and think because I'm hard up I have lost my grip on you. *I'll never do that.* I can disgrace you all so Grass River wouldn't wash your names clean again. So run along. You and the Shirleys will do as I say. You don't *dare* not to. And this pretty Leigh, such a gross old creature as you are fond of, she can work herself to skin and bone to pay off another mortgage to help Jim. Poor fellow can't work like most men, big as he is. I remember when he got started wrong in his lungs back in Ohio when he was a boy. He blamed Tank for shutting him out in the cold one night, or something like it. That give him his start. He always blamed Tank for everything. Why, he and Tank had a fight the last time they were together, and he nearly broke his brother's arm off —"

"Oh, shut up," Champers snapped out.

"Well, be active. I'll give you till tomorrow night; that's ample," Smith snapped back. "Hans and you are all the people in town who know I'm here now except the fat woman who waits on the table at Wyker's. I'm lying low right now, but I won't stay hid long; Wyker'll keep me over one more day, I reckon. Even he's turned against me when I've got no money to loan him, but I'll be on my feet again."

"Say, Smith, come in tomorrow night, but don't hurry away now." The big man's tone was too level to show which way his meaning ran. "I'd like to go into matters a little with you."

Smith settled back in his chair and waited with the air of one not to be coaxed.

"You are right in sayin' I'd like to hide some transactions. Not many real estate men went through the boom days here who don't need to feel that way. We was all property mad, and you and me and Wyker run our bluff same as any of 'em, an' we busted the spirit of the law to flinders. And our givin' and gettin' deeds and our buyin' tax titles an' forty things we done, was so irregular it might or mightn't stand in court now, dependin' altogether on how good a lawyer for technicalities we was able to employ. We know'd the game we was playin', too, and excused ourselves, thinkin' the Lord wouldn't find us special among so many qualified for the same game. Smith, I know danged well I'm not so 'shamed of that as I should be. The thing that hurts me wouldn't be cards for you at all. It's the brutal, inhumane things no law can touch me for; it's trying to do honest men out'n their freeholds; it's holdin' back them grasshopper sufferer supplies, an' havin'

the very men I robbed treatin' me like a gentleman now, that's cutting my rhinoceros hide into strips and hangin' it on the fence. But you can't capitalize a thing like that in your business."

"Well, I know what I can do."

"As to what you can do to me, you've run that bluff till it's slick on the track. And I've know'd it just as long as you have, anyhow. Here's my particular stunt with you. I had business East in '96, time of the big May flood, and I run down to Cloverdale, Ohio, for a day. The waters was up higher'n they'd been know'd for some years."

Thomas Smith had stiffened in his chair and sat rigidly gripping the arms. But Champers seemed not to notice this as he continued:

"The fill where the railroad cuts acrost the old Aydelot farm was washed out and kep' down the back water from floodin' the low ground. But naturally it washed out considerable right there."

Smith's face was deadly pale now, with the crooked scar a livid streak across his forehead. Champers deliberated before he went on. All his blustering method disappeared and he kept to the even tone and unruffled demeanor.

"The danged little crick t'other side of town got rampageous late in the afternoon, and the whole crowd that had watched Clover Crick all day went pellmellin' off to see new sights, leavin' me entirely alone by the washout. I remember what you said about pretendin' to commit yourself to your Maker there in an agreement between you as cashier an' Tank Shirley, an' the place interested me a lot."

A finer-fibred man could hardly have resisted the agon-

ized face of Thomas Smith. A cowardly nature would have feared the anger back of it.

"It was gettin' late and pretty cloudy still, and nobody by, an' I staid round, an' staid round, when just at the right place the bank broke away and I see the body of a man — just the skeleton mainly, right where *you* didn't commit your pretended suicide. Somebody committed it there for you evidently. There was only a few marks of identification, a big set ring with a jagged break in the set that swiped too swift acrost a man's face might leave a ugly scar for life, and if the fellow tried too hard to drown hisself he might wrench a man's right arm so out o' plum he couldn't never do much signin' his name again. I disposed of the remains decent as I could, for Doc Carey was leisurely coming down National pike from Jane Aydelot's, an' it was gettin' late, an' no cheerful place nor job in a crowd in sunshiny weather, let alone there in the dusk of the evening. Wow! I dreamt of that there gruesome thing two weeks. I throwed the shovel in the crick. Would you like me to show you where to go to dig, so's you can be sure your plan with Tank Shirley worked and you didn't drown, after all? And are you sure you ain't been misrepresenting things to me a little as agent for Tank Shirley? Are you right sure you ain't Tank Shirley himself? I've kep' still for four years, not to save you nor myself, but to keep Leigh Shirley's name from bein' dragged into court 'longside a name like yours or mine. I never misuse the women, no matter how tricky I am with men."

Then, as an afterthought, Champers added:

"It's so danged hot this afternoon I can't get over to Grass River; and I got word to meet Jacobs over at the

Little Wolf Ranch later, so I think I'll take the crooked trail up to that place; it's a lot the coolest road, and I'll wait till the sun's most down. I guess that three thousand dollar mortgage can wait over a day now, less you feel too cramped."

Thomas Smith rose from his chair. His face was ashy and his small black eyes burned with a wicked fire. He gave one long, steady look into Champers' face and slipped from the rear door like a shadow.

Darley Champers knew he had won the day, and no sense of personal danger had ever troubled him. He settled back in his chair, drew a long sigh of relief, and soon snored comfortably through his afternoon's nap.

When he awoke it was quite dark, for the storm cloud covered the sky and the hot breath from the west was like the air from a furnace mouth.

"It's not late, but it's danged hot. I wonder why that Jew wanted me to meet him over there. Couldn't he have come here? I'm wet with sweat now. How'll I be by the time I get out to that ranch?" Champers stretched his limbs and mopped his hot neck with his handkerchief. "I reckon I'd better go, though. Jacobs always knows why he wants a thing. And he's the finest man ever came out of Jewey. With him in town and Asher Aydelot on a farm, no city nor rural communities could be more blessed."

Then he remembered Thomas Smith and a cold shiver seized his big, perspiring body.

"I wonder why I dread to go," he said, half aloud. "The creek trail will be cool, but, golly, I'm danged cold right now."

Again his mind ran to Smith's face as he had seen it

last. He put on his hat and started to take his long raincoat off the hook behind the rear door.

"Reckon I'd better take it. It looks like storming," he muttered. "Hello! What the devil!"

For Rosie Gimpke, with blazing cheeks and hair dripping with perspiration, was hidden behind the coat.

"Oh, Mr. Champers, go queek and find Yon Yacob, but don't go the creek roat. I coom slippin' to tell you to go sure, and I hit when that strange man coom slippin' in. I hear all you say, an' I see him troo der crack here, an' he stant out there a long time looking back in here. So I half to wait an' you go nappin' an' I still wait. I wait to say, hurry, but don't go oop nor down der creek trail. I do anything for Miss Shirley, an' I like you for takin' care off her goot name; goot names iss hardt to get back if dey gets avay. Hurry."

"Heaven bless your good soul!" Champers said heartily. "But why not take the cool road? I've overslept and I've got to hurry and the storm's hustling in."

"Don't, please don't take it," Rosie begged.

The next minute she was gone and as Champers closed and locked his doors he said to himself, "She does her work like a hero and never will have any credit for it, 'cause she's not a pioneer nor a soldier. But she has saved more than one poor fellow snared into that joint I winked at for years."

Then, obedient to her urging, he followed the longer, hotter road toward the Jacobs' stock ranch bordering on Little Wolf Creek.

Meantime, John Jacobs inspected his property, forgetful of the intense heat and the coming storm, his mind full of

a strange foreboding. At the top of the hill above where the road wound down through deep shadows he sat a long while on his horse. "I wonder what makes me so lonely this evening," he mused. "I'm not of a lonely nature, nor morose, thank the Lord! There's no telling why we do or don't want to do things. I wonder where Champers is. He ought to be coming up pretty soon. I wonder if I hadn't had that dream two nights ago about that picture I saw in a book, when I was a little chap, if I'd had this fool's cowardice about being out here alone today. And what was it that made me look over all those papers in my vault box last night? I have helped Careyville some, and the library I built will have a good endowment when I'm gone, and so will the children's park, and the Temperance Societies. Maybe I've not lived in vain, if I have been an exacting Jew. I never asked for the blood in my pound of flesh, anyhow. I wonder where Champers can be."

He listened intently and thought he heard someone coming around the bend down the darkening way.

"That's he, I guess, now," he said.

Then he turned his face toward the wide prairie unrolling to the westward. Overhanging it were writhing clouds, hurled hither and thither, twisted, frayed, and burst asunder by the titanic forces of the upper air, and all converging with centripetal violence toward one vast maelstrom. Its long, funnel-shaped form dipped and lifted, trailing back and forth like some sensate thing. With it came an increasing roar from the clashing of timber up the valley. The vivid shafts of lightning and the blackness that followed them made the scene terrific with Nature's majestic madness.

"I must get shelter somewhere," Jacobs said. "I am

sorry Champers failed me. I wanted his counsel before I slipped up on Wyker tonight. I thought I heard him coming just now. Maybe he's waiting for me under cover. I'll go down and see."

The roar of the cyclone grew louder and the long swinging funnel lifted and dipped and lifted again, as the awful forces of the air hurled it onward.

Down at the sharp bend in the road Thomas Smith was crouching, just where the rift in the bank opened to the creek, and the face of the man was not good to look upon nor to remember.

"I'll show Darley Champers how well my left hand works. There'll be no telltale scar left on his face when I'm through, and he can tumble right straight down to the water from here and on to hell, and Wyker's joint may bear the blame. Damned old Dutchman, to turn me out now. I set him up in business when I had money. Here comes Champers now."

The storm-cloud burst upon the hill at that moment. John Jacobs' horse leaped forward on the steep slope, slid, and fell to its knees. As it sprang up again the two men could not see each other, for a flash of lightning blinded them and in the crash of thunder that burst at the same instant, filling the valley with deafening roar, the sharp report of a double pistol-shot was swallowed up.

An hour later Darley Champers, drenched with rain, stumbled down the crooked trail in the semi-darkness. The cool air came fanning out of the west and a faint rift along the horizon line gave promise of a glorious April sunset.

As Darley reached the twist in the trail which John

Jacobs always dreaded, the place Thaine Aydelot and Leigh Shirley had invested with sweet memories, he suddenly drew his rein and stared in horror.

Lying in the rift with his head toward the deep waters of Little Wolf Creek lay Thomas Smith, scowling with unseeing eyes at the fast clearing sky. While on the farther side of the road lay the still form of John Jacobs, rain-beaten and smeared with mud, as if he had struggled backward in his death-throes.

As Champers bent tenderly over him, the smile on his lips took away the awfulness of the sight, and the serenity of the rain-drenched face rested as visible token of an abundant entrance into eternal peace.

Grass River and Big Wolf settlements had never before known a tragedy so appalling as the assassination of John Jacobs at the hands of an "unknown" man. Hans Wyker had gone to Kansas City on the day before the event and Wykerton never saw his face again. Rosie Gimpke, who did not know the stranger's name, and Darley Champers, who thought he did, believed nothing could be gained by talking, so they held their peace. And Thomas Smith went "unknown" back to the dust of the prairie in the Grass River graveyard.

The coroner tried faithfully to locate the blame. But as Jacobs was unarmed and was shot from the front, and the stranger had only one bullet in his revolver and was shot from behind, and as nobody lost nor gained by not untangling the mystery, the affair after a nine days' complete threshing, went into local history, the place of sepulchre.

CHAPTER XXI

JANE AYDELOT'S WILL

Impulsive, earnest, prompt to act,
And make her generous thought a fact,
Keeping with many a light disguise
The secret of self-sacrifice,
O heart sore-tried! thou hast the best
That Heaven itself could give thee—rest.
—SNOW BOUND.

DARLEY CHAMPERS sat in his little office absorbed in business. The May morning was ideal. Through the front door the sounds of the street drifted in. Through the rear door the roomy backyard, which was Champers' one domestic pleasure, sent in an odor of white lilac. By all the rules Champers should have preferred hollyhocks and red peonies, if he had cared for flowers at all. It was for the memory of the old mother, whom he would not turn adrift to please a frivolous wife, that he grew the white blossoms she had loved. But as he never spoke of her, nor seemed to see any other flowers, nobody noticed the peculiarity.

"I wonder how I missed that mail?" he mused, as he turned a foreign envelope in his hands. "I reckon the sight of that poor devil, Smith, dropping into town so suddenly five days ago upset me so I forgot my mail and went to see the Shirleys. And the hot afternoon and Smith's coming in here, and—" Darley leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"Poor Jacobs! Why should he be taken? Smith was gunning for me and mistook his man. Lord knows I wasn't fit to go."

He leaned his elbow heavily on the table, resting his head on his hand.

"If Jacobs went on in my place, sacrificed for my sins, so help me God, I'll carry on his work here. I'll fight the liquor business to the end of my days. There shan't no joint nor doggery never open a door on Big Wolf no more. I'll do a man's part for the world I've been doin' for my own profit most of my life."

His brow cleared, and a new expression came to the bluff countenance. The humaneness within him was doing its perfect work.

"But about this mail, now." He took up the letter again. "Carey says he ain't coming back. Him and young Aydelot's dead sure to go to China soon. An' I'm to handle his business as per previous directions. This is the first of it. Somebody puttin' on mournin' style, I reckon."

Champers took up a black-edged envelope, whose contents told him as Dr. Horace Carey's representative that Miss Jane Aydelot of Cloverdale was no longer living and much more as unnecessary to the business of the moment as a black-bordered envelope is unnecessary to the business of life. Then he opened a drawer in his small office safe and took out a bundle of letters.

"Here's a copy of her will. That's to go to Miss Shirley to read. An' a copy of old Francis Aydelot's will. What's the value of that, d' you reckon? Also to be showed to Miss Leigh Shirley. An' here's — what?"

Darley Champers opened the last envelope and began to

read. He stopped suddenly and gave a long surprised whistle.

Beautiful as the morning was, the man laid down the papers, carefully locked both doors and drew down the front blinds. He took up the envelope and read its contents. He read them a second time. Then he put down the neatly written pages and sat staring at nothing for a long time. He took them up at length for a third reading.

"Everything comes out at last," he murmured. "Oh, Lord, I'm glad Doc Carey got hold of me when he did."

Slowly he ran his eyes down the lines as he read in a half whisper:

I was walking down the National pike road toward Cloverdale with little Leigh in the twilight. Where the railroad crosses Clover Creek on the high fill we saw Tank Shirley and the young cashier, Terrence Smalley, who had disappeared after the bank failure. It seems Tank had promised to pay Smalley to stay away and to find Jim and get his property away from him. Evidently Tank had not kept his word, for they were quarreling and came to blows until the cashier's face was cut and bleeding above the eye. There was a struggle, and one pushed the other over the bank into the deep water there. Little as Leigh was, she knew one of the men was her father, and we thought he had pushed Smalley into the creek. He had a sort of paralyzed arm and could not swim. I tried to make her forget all about it. I promised her my home and farm some day if she would never tell what she had seen. She shut her lips, but if she forgot, I cannot tell.

That night I went alone to the fill and found Terrence Smalley with a cut face and a twisted shoulder lying above the place where Tank went down. I helped him to my home and dressed his wounds. I may have done wrong not to deliver him to the authorities, but he had a bad story to tell of Tank's bank record that would have disgraced the Shirley family in Ohio, so we made an agreement. He would never make himself known to Leigh, nor in any way disturb her life nor reveal anything of her father's life to disgrace her name, if I let him go. And I agreed not to report what I had seen, nor to tell what I knew to his hurt. He promised me also never to show his face in Cloverdale

again. He was a selfish, dishonest man, who used Tank Shirley's hatred of his brother and his other sins to hide his own wrong-doing. But I tried to do my duty by the innocent ones who must suffer, when I turned him loose with his conscience. I do not know what has become of him, but, so far as I do know, he has kept the secret of Tank Shirley's crooked dealing with the Cloverdale bank, and he has never annoyed Leigh, nor brought any disgrace to her name. This statement duly witnessed, etc.

Slowly Darley Champers read. Then, laying down the pages, he said as slowly: "'Unknown' in the Grass River graveyard. 'Unknown' to Jim Shirley and Asher Aydelot, whose eyes he'd never let see him. I understand now, why. Known to me as Thomas Smith, an escaped defaultin' bank cashier who didn't commit suicide. Known to the late Miss Aydelot as Tank Shirley's murderer. If the devil knows where to git on the track of that scoundrel an' locate him properly in hell, he'll do it without my help. By the Lord Almighty, I'll never tell what I know. An' this paper goes to ashes here. Oh, Caesar! If I could only burn up the recollection that I was ever low-down an' money-grubbin' enough to collute with such as him for business. I'm danged glad I had that quarter kep' in Leigh's name 'stead of Jim's. That's why Thomas Smith threatened and didn't act. He didn't dare to go against Leigh as long as Jane Aydelot was livin'."

He stuck a blazing match to the letter and watched it crumple to ashes on the rusty stove-hearth. Then he carefully swept the ashes on a newspaper, and, opening his doors again, he scattered them in the dusty main street of Wykerton.

That afternoon Champers went again to the Cloverdale Ranch. Leigh was alone, busy with her brushes and paint-board in the seat on the lawn where Thaine Aydelot had

found her on the summer day painting sunflowers. The first little sunflower was blooming now by the meadow fence.

"Don't git up, Miss Shirley. Keep your seat, mom. I dropped in on a little business. I'm glad to set out here."

Champers took off his hat and fanned his red face as he sat on the ground and looked out at the winding river bordered by alfalfa fields.

"Nice stand you got out there." He pointed with his hat toward the fields. "Where's Jim?"

"He and Asher Aydelot have gone to Careyville to settle some of John Jacobs' affairs. They and Todd Stewart are named as trustees in the will," Leigh replied.

She had laid aside her brushes and sat with her hands folded in her lap. Champers pulled up a spear of bluegrass and chewed it thoughtfully. At length he said:

"Yes, I knew that. Jacobs left no end of things in the way of property for me to look after. I'll report to them now. I seem to be general handy man. Doc Carey left matters with me, too."

"Yes?" Leigh said courteously.

"Well, referrin' to that matter regardin' your father we spoke of the other day, I find, through Doc Carey's helpin' an' some other ways, that your father, Mr. Tank Shirley, was accidentally drowned in Clover Creek, Ohio, some years ago. So far as I can find out, he died insolvent. If I discover anything further, I'll let you know."

Leigh sat very still, her eyes on the far-away headlands that seemed like blue cloud banks at the moment.

"Had you heard of Miss Jane Aydelot's demise? I reckon you had, of course. But do you know what her intentions were?"

Leigh looked steadily at her questioner. All her life she had had a way of keeping her own counsel, nor was it ever easy to know what her thoughts might be.

"Miss Shirley, the late Miss Jane Aydelot trusted Doc Carey to look after her affairs. Doc Carey, he trusted me to take his place. Can you trust me to be the last link of the chain in doin' her business? My grammar's poor, but my hands is clean now, thank the Lord!"

"Yes, Mr. Champers, I am sure of your uprightness."

Leigh did not dream how grateful these words were to the man before her, honestly trying to beat back to better ideals of life.

"When I was a very little girl," Leigh went on, "Miss Jane told me I was to be her heir."

Darley gave a start, but as Leigh's face was calm, he could only wonder how much she had remembered.

"All the years since I've lived in Kansas I've been kept in mind in many ways of her favor toward me. I came to know long ago that she was determined to leave me all the old Aydelot estate. And I knew also that it should have been Asher's, not mine."

Darley thought of Thaine, and, dull as he was, he read in a flash a romance that many a finer mind might have missed.

"Well, sufferin' catfish!" he said to himself. "Danged plucky girl; forges along an' bucks me into sellin' her this ranch an' sets it into alfalfy an' sets up Jim Shirley for life, 'cause putterin' in the garden an' bein' kind to the neighbors is the limit to that big man's endurance. An' this pretty girl, knowin' that Aydelot property ought to be Thaine Aydelot's, just turns it down, an', by golly, I'll

bet she turns him down, too, fearin' he wouldn't feel like takin' it. An' he's clear hiked to the edges of Chiny. Well, it's a danged queer world. I'm glad I've only got Darley Champers to look out for. The day I see them two drivin' out of Wykerton towards Little Wolf, the time she'd closed the Cloverdale ranch deal, I knowed the white lilac mother used to love was sweeter in my back lot."

"I could not take Miss Jane's property and be happy," Leigh went on. "Besides, I can earn a living. See what my brushes can do, and see the secret I learned in the Coburn book."

Leigh held up the sketch she was finishing, then pointed to the broad alfalfa acres, refreshingly green in the May sunlight.

"Well, I brought down a copy of the late Miss Aydelot's will that she left with Doc Carey, who is goin' to Chiny in a few days, him an' Thaine Aydelot, Doc writes me. An' you can look over it. I've got to go to Cloverdale next week an' settle things there, an' see that the probatin's are straight. Lemme hear from you before I go. I must be gettin' on. Danged fine country, this Grass River Valley. Who'd a' thought it back in the seventies when Jim Shirley an' Asher Aydelot squatted here? Goodday."

Left alone, Leigh Shirley opened the big envelope holding the will of Francis Aydelot and read in it the stern decree that no child of Virginia Thaine should inherit the Aydelot estate in Ohio.

"That's why Miss Jane couldn't leave it to Asher's son," she murmured.

Then she read the will of the late Jane Aydelot. When she lifted her face from its pages, her fair cheeks were

pink with excitement, her deep violet eyes were shining, her lips were parted in a glad smile. She went down to the meadow fence and plucked the first little golden sunflower from its stem, and stood holding it as she looked away to where the three headlands stood up clear and shimmering in the light of the May afternoon. That night two letters were hurried to the postoffice. One went no farther than Wykerton to tell Darley Champers that Leigh would heartily approve of any action he might take in the business that was taking him to Ohio.

CHAPTER XXII

The Farther Wilderness

And beyond the baths of sunset found new worlds.
—London.

DR. CAREY and Thaine Aydelot sat watching the play of a fountain in a moonlit garden of tropical loveliness. In the Manila hospital Thaine had gone far down the Valley of the Shadow of Death before he reached a turning point. But youth, good blood, a constitution seasoned by camp and field, the watchful care of his physician, and the blessing of the Great Physician, from whom is all health, at last prevailed, and he came back sturdily to life and strength.

As the two men sat enjoying the hour Dr. Carey suddenly asked:

"After this hospital service, what next?"

"How soon does this involuntary servitude end?" Thaine inquired.

"A fortnight will do all that is possible for us," Carey answered.

"Then I'll enlist with the regulars," Thaine declared.

"Do you mean to follow a military life?" Carey inquired, bending forward to watch the play of light on the silvery waters, unconscious of the play of moonbeams on his silvery hair.

"No, not always," Thaine responded.

"Then why don't you go home now?" Carey went on.

Thaine sat silent for some minutes. Then he rose to

his full height, the strong, muscular, agile embodiment of military requirement. On his face the firing line had graven a nobility the old brown Kansas prairies had never seen.

He did not know how to tell Dr. Carey, because he did not yet fully understand himself, that war to him must be a means, not an end, to his career; nor that in the long quiet hours in the hospital the call of the Kansas prairies, half a world away, was beginning to reach his ears, the belief that the man behind the plow may be no less a patriot than the man behind the gun; that the lifelong influence of his farmer father and mother was unconsciously winning him back to the peaceful struggle with the soil. At length he said slowly:

"Dr. Carey, when I saw Lieutenant Alford brought in I counted the cost again. Only American ideals of government and civilization can win this wilderness. For this Alford's blood was shed. He wrote to his mother on Christmas day that he was studying here to get his Master's Degree from the Kansas University. I saw him just after he had received his diploma for that Degree. I was a fairly law-abiding civilian. The first shot of the campaign last February began in me what Alford's sacrifice completed. I am waiting to see what next. But I have one thing firmly fixed now. Warfare only opens the way for the wilderness winners to come in and make a kingdom. The Remington rifle runs back the frontier line; the plowshare holds the land at last. I want, when my service here is done, to go back to the wheatfields and the cornfields. I want to smell the alfalfa and see the prairie windbreaks and be king of a Kansas farm. I've lost my ambition for gold

lace. I want a bigger mental ring of growth every year, and I believe the biggest place for me to get this will be with my feet on the prairie sod. Meantime, I shall reenlist, as I said."

"Sit down, Thaine, and let me ask you one question," Dr. Carey said.

The young man dropped to his seat again.

"When your service is done is there anything to hold you from going straight to the Grass River Valley again?"

Thaine leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head while he looked steadily at the splashing waters before him as he said frankly:

"Yes, there is. When I go back I want Leigh Shirley —and it's no use wanting."

"Thaine, you were a law-abiding civilian at home. The university made you a student. You came out here a fearless soldier to fight your country's enemies. Alford's death made you a patriot who would plant American ideals in these islands. May I tell you that there is still one more lesson to learn?"

Thaine looked up inquiringly.

"You must learn to be a Christian. You must know what service for humanity means. Then the call to duty will be a bugle note of victory wherever that duty may be. You needn't hunt for opportunity to prove this. The opportunity is hurrying toward you now from out of the Unknown."

The fine head with the heavy masses of white hair seemed halo-crowned at that moment. It was as he appeared that night that Thaine Aydelot always remembers him. Two weeks later Thaine enlisted in the Fourteenth United States

Infantry, stationed in Luzon. Dr. Carey was also enrolled in its hospital staff. In July the regiment was ordered from the Philippines to join the allied armies of the World Powers at Tien-Tsin in a northern Chinese province, where the Boxer forces were massing about Peking. And Thaine's opportunity for learning his greatest lesson came hurrying toward him from out of the Unknown.

This notorious Boxer uprising, gone now into military annals, had reached the high tide of its power. Beginning in the southern province of China, it spread northward, menacing the entire Empire. A secret sect at first, it was augmented by the riffraff that feeds on any new, and especially lawless, body; by deserters disloyal to the imperial government; by the ignorant and the unthinking; by the intimidated and the intimidating. It enrolled an armed force of one hundred and seventy-five thousand soldiers. Its purposes were fanatical. It aimed by the cruelest means to root out every idea of modern life and thought in China; every occidental invention, every progressive method of society, every scientific discovery for the betterment of humanity. And especially did it aim to put to death every native Chinese Christian, to massacre every missionary of the Christ, and to drive out or destroy every foreign citizen in China. Its resources were abundant, its equipment was ample, its methods unspeakably atrocious. Month after month the published record of this rebellion was sickening — its unwritten history beyond human imagining. Impenetrable were its walled cities, countless in numbers, unknown the scenes of its vast plains and rivers and barren fields and mountain fastnesses. Fifteen thousand native Christians and hundreds of foreigners were brutally massa-

cred. At last it centered its strength about the great city of Peking. And a faint, smothered wail for deliverance came from the Foreign Legation shut in behind beleaguered walls inside that city to starve or perish at the hands of the bloody Boxers.

Very patiently the World Powers waited and warned the Chinese leaders of a day of retribution. Fanatics are fanatics because they cannot learn. The conditions only whetted the Boxers to greater barbarity. They believed themselves invincible and they laughed to scorn all thought of foreign interference. Then came the sword of the Lord and of Gideon to the battle lines at Tien-Tsin on the Peiho River, as it came once long ago to the valley of Jezreel.

In the mid-afternoon of an August day Thaine Aydelot heard the bugle note calling the troops to marching order. Thaine was fond of the bugler, a little fifteen-year-old Kansas boy named Kemper, because he remembered that Asher Aydelot had been a drummer boy once when he was no older than "Little Kemper," as the regiment called him.

"I wish you were where my father is now, Kemper," Thaine said as the boy skipped by him.

"Where's that? It can't be hell or he'd be with us," Little Kemper replied.

"No, he's in Kansas," Thaine said.

"Oh, that's right next door to heaven, but I can't go just yet. There's too much doing here," the little bugler declared as he hurried away.

Young as he was, Little Kemper was the busiest member of the regiment. Life with him was a continual "doing" and he did it joyously and well.

"There's something doing here." Thaine hardly had

time to think it as the armies came into their places. It was the third day after the regiment had reached Tien-Tsin. Along the Peiho river lay a sandy plain with scant tillage and great stretches of barren lands. Here and there were squalid villages with now and then a few more pretentious structures with adobe brick walls and tiled roofs. Everywhere was the desolation of ignorance and fear, saddening enough, without the Boxer rebellion to intensify it with months of dreadful warfare.

As Thaine fell into his place he thought of the Aydelot wheatfields and of the alfalfa that Leigh Shirley's patient judgment had helped to spread over the Cloverdale Ranch. And even in the face of such big things as he was on his way to meet the conquest of the prairie soil seemed wonderful.

Big things were waiting him now, and his heart throbbed with their bigness as his regiment took its place. It was a wonderful company that fell into line and swung up the Peiho river that August afternoon. The world never saw its like before, and may never see it again. Not wonderful in numbers, for there were only sixteen thousand of the allied armies, all told, to pit themselves against an armed force able to line up one hundred and sixteen thousand against them. Not numbers, but varying nationalities, varying races, strange confusion of tongues, with one common purpose binding all into one body, made the company forming on the banks of the Peiho a wonderful one.

Thaine's regiment was drawn up at an angle with the line, ready to fall into its place among the reserves, and the young Kansan watched the flower of the world's soldiery file along the way.

In the front were the little brown Japanese Cavalry, Artillery, and Infantry — men who in battle make dying as much their business as living. Beside these were the English forces, the Scotch Highlanders, the Welsh Fusiliers, the Royal Artillery, all in best array. Behind them the Indian Empire troops, the Sikh Infantry with a sprinkling of Sepoys and the Mounted Bengalese Lancers. Then followed, each in its place, the Italian marines and foot soldiery, the well-groomed French troops from all branches of the military; the stalwart, fair-haired Germans, soldiers to a finish in weight and training; the Siberian Cossacks and the Russian Infantry and Cavalry, big, brutal looking men whom women of any nation might fear. In reserve at the last of the line were the American forces, the Ninth and Fourteenth Regiments of Infantry, the Sixth Cavalry, and F Battery of the Fifth Artillery.

So marched the host from Tien-Tsin along the sandy plains, led on by one purpose, to reach the old city of Peking and save the lives of the foreign citizens shut up inside their compound — whether massacred, or living, starved, and tortured, this allied army then could not know.

The August day was intensely hot, with its hours made grievous by a heavy, humid air, and the sand and thick dust ground and flung up in clouds by sixteen thousand troops, with all the cavalry hoofs and artillery wheels. It was only a type of the ten days that followed, wherein heat and dust and humid air, and thirst — burning, maddening thirst — joined together against the brave soldiery fighting not for fortune, nor glory, nor patriotism, but for humanity.

As they tramped away in military order, Thaine Aydelot said to his nearest comrade:

"Goodrich, I saw a familiar German face up in the line."

"Friend of yours the Emperor sent out to keep you company?" Goodrich inquired with a smile.

"No, a Kansas joint-keeper named Hans Wyker. What do you suppose put him against the Boxers?"

"Oh, the army is the last resort for some men. It's society's clearing house," Goodrich replied.

The speaker was a Harvard man, a cultured gentleman, in civil life a University Professor. The same high purpose was in his service that controlled Thaine Aydelot now.

"I don't like being at the tail-end of this procession," a big German from the Pennsylvania foundries declared, as he trudged sturdily along under the blazing sun. The courage in his determined face and his huge strength would warrant him a place in the front line anywhere.

"Nor I, Schwoebel," Thaine declared. "I came out with Funston's 'Fighting Twentieth.' I'm used to being called back, not tolled along after the rear."

"Rock Chalk! Jay Hawk! K U!" roared Schwoebel in a tremendous bellow.

"Rock Chalk! Jay Hawk! K U!" a Pennsylvania University man named McLearn followed Schwoebel.

"Rock Chalk! Jay Hawk! K U!" went down the whole line of infantry.

The old Kansas University yell, taken to the Philippines by college men, became the battle cry of the Twentieth Kansas Volunteers, who when they returned to civil life, left it there for the American army — and "Rock Chalk! Jay Hawk! K U!" became the American watchword and cry

of all that "far flung battle line" marching on through dust and heat to rescue the imperiled Christians in a beleagured fortress inside the impregnable city of Peking.

"You needn't worry about the rear, Aydelot. One engagement may whip this line about, end to end, or it may scale off all that's in front of us and leave nothing but the rear. All this before we have time to change collars again. We'll let you or Tasker here lead into Peking," an Indiana University man declared.

"That's good of you, Binford. Some Kansas man will be first to carry the flag into Peking. It might as well be Aydelot."

This from Tasker, a slender young fellow from a Kansas railroad office.

So they joked as they tramped along. It was nearly midnight when they pitched camp before the little village of Peit-Tsang beside the Peiho.

In the dim dawning of the August morning Little Kemper's bugle sounded the morning reveille. Thaine was just dreaming of home and he thought the first bugle note was the call for him up the stairway of the Sunflower Inn. His windows looked out on the Aydelot wheatfields and the grove beyond, and every morning the sunrise across the level eastern prairie made a picture only the hand of the Infinite could paint. This morning he opened his eyes on a far different scene. The reveille became a call to arms and the troops fell into line ready for battle.

Before the sun had reached the zenith the line was whipped end to end, as Binford of Indiana had said it might be. In this engagement on the sandy plain about the little village of Peit-Tsang, Thaine with his comrades

saw what it meant to lead that battle line. He saw the brave little Japanese mowed down like standing grain before the reaper's sickle. He saw the ranks move swiftly up to take the places of the fallen, never wavering nor retreating, rushing to certain death as to places of vantage in a coronal pageantry. The Filipino's Mauser was as deadly as the older style gun of the Boxer. A bullet aimed true does a bullet's work. But in this battle that raged about Peit-Tsang Thaine quickly discovered that this was no fight in a Filipino jungle. Here was real war, as big and terrible above the campaigns he had known in Luzon as the purpose in it was big above loyalty to the flag and extension of American dominion and ideals.

When the thing was ended with the routing of the Boxer forces, of the sixteen thousand that went into battle a tithe of one-tenth of their number lay dead on the plains — sixteen hundred men, the cost of conquest in a far wilderness. The heaviest toll fell on the brave Japanese who had led in the attack.

Thaine Aydelot did not dream of home that night. He slept on his arms the heavy sleep of utter weariness, which Little Kemper's bugle call broke at three o'clock the next morning. Before the August sun had crawled over the eastern horizon the armies were swinging up the Peiho river toward Peking. The American troops were leading the column now, as Thaine Aydelot had wished they might, and in all that followed after the day at Peit-Tsang the Stars and Stripes, brave token of a brave people, floated above the front lines of soldiery, even to the end of the struggle.

It was high noon above the Orient, where the Peiho

flows beside the populous town of Yang-Tsun. The Boxer army routed by the battle of Peit-Tsang had massed its front before the town, a formidable array in numbers, equipment, and frenzied eagerness to halt here and forever the poor little line of foreign soldiers creeping in upon it from the sea. The Boxers knew that they could match the fighting strength of this line with quadruple force. The troops coming toward them had marched twelve miles under the August heat of a hundred degrees, through sand and alkali dust, in the heavy humid air saturated with evil odors. They had had no food since the night before, nor a drink of water since daydawn. Joyful would it be to slaughter here the entire band and then rush back to the hoary old City of Peking with the triumphant message that the Allied Armies of the World had fallen before China. Then the death of every foreigner in the Empire would be certain.

At noon the battle lines were formed. In the swinging into place as Thaine Aydelot stood beside Tasker, surrounded by his comrades, Little Kemper dashed by him.

"Here's where the corn-fed Kansans do their work," he said gaily to the Kansas men.

"With a few bean-eaters from Boston to help," Goodrich responded.

"And a Hoosier to give them culture," Binford added.

"Yes, yes, with the William Penn Quakers and the Pennsylvania Dutch," Schwoebel roared, striking McLearn on the shoulder.

Men think of many things as the battle breaks, but never do they fight less bravely because they have laughed the moment before.

Thaine was in the very front of the battle lines. In the pause before the first onslaught he thought of many things confusedly and a few most vividly. He thought of Leigh Shirley and her childish dream of Prince Quippi in China — the China just beyond the purple notches. He thought of his mother as she had looked that spring morning when he talked of enlisting for the Spanish War. He thought of his father, who had never known fear in his life. Of his last words:

"As thy days so shall thy strength be."

And keenly he remembered Dr. Carey, somewhere among the troops behind him. The fine head crowned with white hair, caressed by the moonbeams, as he had seen it in the Manila garden, and his earnest words:

"You must learn to be a Christian. You must know what service for humanity means. You need not hunt for the opportunity to prove this. The opportunity is hurrying toward you now out of the Unknown."

"It is here, the opportunity," he murmured. "Oh, God, make me a fit soldier for Thy service."

He did not pray for safety from danger and death; he asked for fitness to serve and in that moment his great lesson was learned. There came an instant's longing for Dr. Carey; then the battle storm burst and he did not think any more, he fought. It were useless to picture that struggle.

Nothing counts in warfare till the results are shown. For six hours the fighting did not cease, and not at Valley Forge, nor Brandywine, Lake Erie, nor Buena Vista, Gettysburg, nor Shiloh, San Juan Hill, nor in any jungle in Luzon did the American flag stream out over

greater heroes than it led today on the plains beside the Peiho river before Yang-Tsun.

At last the firing ceased, the smoke lifted above the field; the Boxers, gathering their shattered forces together, retreated again before the little line of Allied Troops invading this big strange land. And the last hours of that long hot day waned to eventide.

There were only a few of its events that Thaine could comprehend. He knew Little Kemper had received his death wound, blowing his bugle calls again and again after he had been stricken, till the last reveille sounded for him. The plucky little body with the big soul, who had found his brief fifteen years of life so full of "doing."

Thaine knew that in the thick of the fight the native Indian Infantry, the Sikhs and Sepoys, had fallen in cowardly fear before the Boxer fire. He remembered how big Schwoebel, and Tasker, and Binford, Goodrich, and McLearn, with himself and another man whom he recalled afterward as Boehringer, a Kansas man, had clubbed self-respect into a few of them and kicked the other whining cowards from their way. He knew that Schwoebel had been grievously wounded and was being taken back to Tien-Tsin with many other brave fellows who had been stricken that day. He knew that near the last of the fray a man whom he had admired and loved second to Lieutenant Alford, big Clint Graham, of a royally fine old family of state builders in far-away Kansas, had fallen by the mistaken shot of Russian cannon, and the weight of that loss hung heavy about the edge of his consciousness wherever he turned. But what followed the battle Thaine Aydelot will never forget.

Twelve hundred men rose no more from that bloody field before Yang-Tsun. The fighting force, sixteen thousand strong, was wearing off at the rate of almost a regiment and a half a day, and it was yet a hundred miles to Peking.

All about Thaine were men with faces grimy as his own; their lips, like his, split and purple from the alkali dust. They had had no water to drink in all that long day's twelve miles of marching and six hours of fighting. Fearful is the price paid out when the wilderness goes forth to war! And heroic, sublimely heroic, may be the Christianity of the battlefield.

"We must help these fellows," Thaine said to his comrades as the wail for water went up from wounded men.

"The river is this way," McLearn declared. "Hurry! the boys are dying."

So over countless forms they hurried to the river's brink for water. Thaine and Tasker and Boehringer were accustomed to muddy streams, for the prairie waters are never clear. But Goodrich from Boston had a memory of mountain brooks. The Pennsylvania man, McLearn, the cold springs of the Alleghanies, and for Binford there was old Broad Ripple out beyond Indianapolis. All these men came down with dry canteens to the Peiho by Yang-Tsun. The river was choked with dead Chinamen and dead dogs and horses. They must push aside the bodies to find room to dip in their canteens.

"You have one more lesson. You must learn to be a Christian."

Somehow the words seemed to ring round and round just out of Thaine's mental sight.

"Vasser! Vasser!" cried a big German soldier before him.

Thaine stooped to give him a drink, and as he lifted up the man's head he saw the stained face of Hans Wyker.

"It's very goot," Hans murmured, licking his lips for more. "Wisky not so goot as vasser," and then he trailed off into a delirium. "Don't tell. Don't tell," he pleaded. "I neffer mean to get Schmitt. I not know he would be der yet. I hide for Yacob, an' I get Schmitt in der back and I only want Yacob. He send me to der pen for sure yet next time. I hate Yon Yacob."

A little silence, then Hans murmured:

"I didn't go to Kansas City. I coom back to Gretchen's home by Little Wolf. I hide where I watch for Yacob. I shoot twice to be sure of Yacob, an' Schmitt, hidin' in der crack by der roat, get one shot. So I coom to Yermany and enlist. Gretchen, she coom too an' she stay der. Vell! I help fight Boxer some. Mine Gott, forgif me. I do once some goot for der world dis day."

And that was the last of Wyker.

The twilight hour was near. The wounded had been borne away by busy Red Cross angels of mercy. Wide away across the Chinese plain the big red sun slipped down the amber summer sky into a bath of molten flame. Then out of sight behind the edge of the world it turned all the west into one magnificent surge of scarlet glory, touching to beauty the tiny gray cloud flecks far away to the eastward; while long rivers of golden light by rivers of roseate glow mingled at last along the zenith in one vast

sweep of mother-of-pearl. A cool breeze came singing in from the sea — fanning the fevered faces of the weary soldiers. The desolate places were hidden by the deepening shadows, and the serenity of the twilight hour fell on the battlefield.

Then the men of each nationality went out to bury their dead. Swiftly the little brown Japanese digged and filled up the graves into which their comrades were deftly heaped. The Russian and Siberian Cossack lunged their fallen ones in heavily and unfeelingly. The Bengalese and Sikhs thrust their own out of sight as they were planting for an uncertain harvest. Each soldier from France who lost his life on that battlefield fell on his own grave and there his countrymen covered him over, an unmarked spot in a foreign land.

Thaine straightened a minute above his spade. The cool breezes were grateful to his heated brow. The after-sunset glow seemed like the benediction of the Infinite on the closing act of the day. He saw the hurried and unfeeling dumping of bodies into the holes awaiting them. Then his heart grew big with something unspeakable as he noted how in all that irreverent and unsympathetic action the American and English soldiery alone were serving as brother for brother. In the long trenches prepared for them their dead were laid with reverent dignity and gentleness. Each one's place was carefully marked with a numbered slab that in a future day the sacred dust might be carried back to the soil of the homeland. As the sunset deepened to richer coloring and the battlefield grew still and still, far along the lines the bands of the English Royal Artillery and the Welsh Fusiliers, with the bagpipes

of the Scottish Highlanders, mingled their music with the music of the splendid band of the Fourteenth American Infantry in the sweet and sacred strains of the beloved old hymn:

Nearer, my God, to Thee,
  Nearer to Thee.
E'en though it be a cross
  That raiseth me.
Still all my song shall be
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
  Nearer to Thee.

And Thaine Aydelot knew that his last and biggest lesson was learned.

CHAPTER XXIII

The End of the Wilderness

Have I named one single river? Have I claimed
one single acre?
Have I kept one single nugget (barring samples)?
No, not I.
Because my price was paid me ten times over by my
Maker.
But you wouldn't understand it. You go up and
occupy.

—*The Explorer.*

THE victory at Yang-Tsun had come with a tremendous loss of life. To go on now promised the cutting to pieces of the entire army. To stay here and await reinforcements would mean the slaughter of all the foreigners in Peking. In a council of war the next day English and Indian, Russian, German, Japanese, Italian, and French, general after general declared for the wisdom of waiting at Yang-Tsun for reinforcements.

Up spoke then General Chaffee of the American command:

"I will not wait while the Boxers massacre the helpless Christians. Stay here or go back to your own countries, as you please. My army will go on to Peking, if it must go alone."

And his will prevailed.

Followed then a memorable march, with the Stars and Stripes ever leading the line. The strength of the force was thirteen thousand now and one thousand of these fell by the way before the end of the journey.

After Yang-Tsun, for the only time in this ten days' campaign, the soldiers undressed and bathed themselves like Christians in the unchristian Peiho, and on the next day, which was the Sabbath, they listened to the military chapel service. Six days they forged onward with the same cruel heat, and scalding air, and alkali dust, and poison water, over dreary plains, through deserted villages, twenty, twenty-five, and even thirty miles a day, they pushed on toward the Chinese capital.

And ever before them the Boxers slowly receded, stinging grievously as they moved. Sure were they that at last only dire calamity could await that slender column moving across the plains, led under a flag of red, white, and blue, with bands ever playing *The Star-Spangled Banner*, while from line on line rolled out that weird battle cry of "Rock Chalk! Jay Hawk! K U!" Sure were they that this stubborn little bands of soldiers foolishly following the receding Boxer must at last crush itself like dead-ripe fruit against the ancient and invincible walls of Peking.

On the evening of the sixth day from Yang-Tsun the twelve thousand men of the Allied Armies, flower of the world's soldiery, stumbled into camp with their outposts in sight of the great walls of the City of Peking. This had been the longest and hottest of all the days, with the weariest length of march. A great storm cloud was rising in the west and the air hung hot and still before it.

Thaine Aydelot and his comrades threw themselves down. too exhausted to care for what might happen next.

"This is the hottest day I ever knew," declared McLearn wearily, as he lay prone on the ground looking up at the hot sky with unblinking eyes.

"I reckon you never hit the National pike on an August day, out between Green Castle and Terre Haute down in Indianny," Binford suggested.

"Nor St. Marys-by-the-Kaw," Boehringer, a Kansas man, added. "There's where you get real summery weather."

"Oh, kill him, Aydelot, he's worse than a Boxer. Don't you know I'm from Boston originally, which is only a State of Mind?" Goodrich urged.

"No matter what state you are from originally, you are in China now, which is in a state of insurrection that we must get ready for a state of resurrection tomorrow. What are you thinking about, T. Aydelot? You look like Moses and the prophets." McLearn half turned over with the question.

Thaine, who was lying on his side, supporting his head on his hand, quoted softly:

"'Oh, the prairies' air so quiet, an' there's allers
lots of room
In the golden fields of Kansas, when the
Sun
Flowers
Bloom.'"

A low boom of thunder rolled across the western sky; a twilight darkness fell on the earth, and a long night of storm and stress began for the army of deliverance encamped before Peking.

Outside the city the Boxers massed in numbers. Inside more than a hundred thousand waited the coming of hardly more than one-tenth of their number. No wonder they felt secure behind their centuries-old walls.

Thaine Aydelot was accustomed to sleeping tentless on the ground and to being beaten by rains. He was a sound sleeper and he was very weary. But tonight he could not sleep. The morrow would see world movements that should change all future history; in which movements he was a tiny unit, as every furrow that his father, Asher Aydelot, had run across the face of the prairie had by so much won it from wilderness to fruitfulness.

All night long the rain poured in torrents upon the camp. A terrific cannonade of thunder shook the earth. The lightning tore through the clouds in jagged tongues of flame. Where Thaine lay he could see with every flash the great frowning black walls of Peking looming up only a few miles away. In the lull of the thunder a more dreadful cannonading could be heard, hour after hour. Thaine knew that inside the walls the Boxers were besieging the Compound. And inside that Compound, if he were yet alive, was his old teacher, Pryor Gaines. He wondered if the God of Battles that had led the armies all this long hard way would fail them now when one more blow might bring deliverance to His children. He remembered again the blessing with which his father had sent him forth:

"As thy day so shall thy strength be. The Eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

The memory brought peace, and at length, wrapped round in the blessing of an absolute trust, he fell asleep.

Inside of the City of Peking on that dreadful night the madness of the Boxer forces was comparable to nothing human. Nor jungle beasts starving for food and drink, frenzied with the smell of blood and the sight of water, could have raged in more maniac fury than the fury pos-

sessing the demon minds of these fanatics in their supreme struggle to flood the streets of Peking with rivers of Christian blood. For such as these the Christ died on the Cross of Calvary. For such as these the missionary is offered up. A human jungle, untamed and waiting, to whose wilderness the soldier became a light-bearer, albeit he brought the gospel of gunpowder to aid him.

The great walls about Peking enclose an area some fourteen miles in length and twelve miles in width. Within these walls lie several cities, separated from each other by walls of lesser strength, intended, with one exception, in the opening of the twentieth century, not so much for defense as for boundary lines.

The exception is the Imperial City, inside whose sacred precincts it was firmly believed a foreigner might not set foot and not be stricken dead by the gods. This City within a city had defenses the allied armies were yet to come against. It lies on the north, inside the great wall. Just east of it, along the north wall, was the Foreign Legation, whose south and east bounds were lesser structures of brick and earth. Here all the foreigners and many native Christians had been shut in for six long weeks, with the infuriated Boxers hammering daily at their gates, mad for massacre.

Here they had barricaded themselves with all the meager means available. They had fortified every gate with whatever might stop a bullet or check a cannon ball. They filled up the broken places in the walls with piles of earth; they dug deep trenches inside these walls, and inside these trenches they had built up heaps of earthworks. Daily they strengthened the weaker places and watched and

prayed. No word from the big world outside seemingly could come to them — a little handful of the Lord's children, forgotten of Him, and locked dungeon deep from human aid. They had sent out a cry for help and had sent up prayers for deliverance. How far that cry had gone they could not know. Frowning walls besieged by enemies lay all around them. They could only look up and lift up helpless hands in prayer to the hot, unpitying August skies above them. Sickness stalked in over the walls. Hunger tore its way through the gates. Death swooped down, and sorrow seeped up, and despair lay in wait. But hope, and trust, and faith, and love failed not.

They ate dogs and horses. They went half naked that they might make sand bags of their clothes for greater defense. They exhausted every means for protection and life, but they forgot not to pray.

On this August night, while unknown to the besieged the Allied Armies encamped only six miles away, the reign of terror reached its height for the little Christian stronghold.

The storm beat pitilessly on the starved and ragged captives. The rain softened the earthworks and the rivers of water in the trenches threatened to undermine the walls. Across these walls the incessant attack of cannon and roar of rifles was beyond anything the six weeks' siege had known, and only the power of Omnipotence could stay the bloody hands. So the long hours of the dreadful night dragged on.

At length came daydawn. The storm had rolled away. A lull in the besieging guns gave the Legation a little rest of mind. Hungry and helpless, it waited the passing

of another day. A silence seemed to fill the city and the wiser ones wondered anxiously what it might portend.

Suddenly, in the midst of it, a great gun boomed out to the northeast. Another gun, and another. Then came a pause and the besieged listened eagerly, for their own walls felt no shock. Again came the bellow of cannon, nearer and heavier, repeated and repeated, and the roll of smoke and the rattling fusillade of bullet shots told that a battle was on. Outside the gates! An army come against Peking! The Army of Deliverance! They were here fighting for the Christians! Oh, the music of birds' song, of rippling waters, of gently pulsing zephyrs, the music of old cathedral chimes, of grandest orchestras — nothing of them all could sound so like to the music that the morning stars sang together as this deafening peal of cannon, this rippling rhythm of Krag rifles.

With bursting hearts they waited and watched the great wall to the north. It is sixty feet high and fully as wide at its base, tapering to twenty-five feet across the top. Could the gates be stormed? Could this wall be shaken? From the highest points inside the Compound eager eyes scanned the northeast as the battle raged on with crash of shells and whir of bullets. Then down to the waiting ones came a message that seemed to fly to every ear in the besieged city, making men and women drop to the ground in a very ecstasy of joy.

"They've run up the Stars and Stripes on the northeast wall!"

The sword of the Lord and of Gideon was come again to Peking, as it came once long ago to the Valley of Jezreel.

The Allied Armies broke camp early on the morning of August fourteen in the year of nineteen hundred. Six miles away stood the most impassable defense an army of the West might ever storm. Yet the twelve thousand men did not hesitate. With General Chaffee's troops in the front of the line they fought through fiercely skirmishing forces up to the hoary old city's gates, the Fourteenth United States Infantry leading the way. The American guns cleared the Chinese soldiery from the top of the walls, and the American cannon were in line ready to blow open the huge gates.

"I want to know what's on the other side before I open up the gates," General Chaffee declared.

So the command was given for a volunteer to scale the wall, to stand up a target for the Chinese rifles! To be blown to pieces by Chinese cannon! Yet the armies must know what awaited them. There must be no debouching into a death-trap for a wholesale massacre.

Thaine Aydelot had cherished one hope since the twilight hour on the battlefield at Yang-Tsun — that when this day should come the American might lead the way through the Peking gates and be first to enter the strange old city. Not merely because he was an American patriot, but because to him the American soldiers with all their sins and follies of youth and military life were yet world missionaries.

Thaine knew his comrades shared his hope, whether for the same high purpose he could not have asked. He had no longer dreams of military glory for himself. His joy was in achievement, no matter by whose hand.

"There's an order for somebody to go up on the wall."

The word was passed along the line. Before it reached

them forget themselves as these poor rescued Christians hugged and kissed their brave rescuers.

Thaine hadn't kissed any woman except his mother since the evening when he and Leigh Shirley had lingered on the Purple Notches in a sad-sweet moment of separation. It lifted the pressure crushing round his heart when he saw Goodrich, with shining eyes, bending to let a poor little missionary stroke his grimy cheek.

The Boxers retired by degrees before the superior force, entrenching themselves inside the Imperial City. Never in its history, centuries on centuries old, had this Imperial City's sacred precincts been defiled by foreign feet. Here the Boxer felt himself secure. Here the gods of his fathers would permit no foreigner to enter. On these hoary old walls no Christian would dare to stand. On three sides of the Imperial City these walls were invincible. The fourth was equipped with six heavy gates.

In a council of the powers the impossibility of storming these gates was fully made clear. The number of soldiers was carefully estimated—American, Japanese, Russian, German, French, and Italian, Sikh and Sepoy, Bengalese, Scotchman, Welsh, and Royal Englishmen. All had suffered heavily in this campaign. None more grievously than the American.

The decision of the council was overwhelming that the Imperial City could not be taken by this little force outside its battlements. Only General Chaffee protested against giving up the attempt.

"Can your men take those walls?" The query came from the leaders.

"My men can take hell," General Chaffee replied, with

less of profanity than of truth in his terms. And the attempt was given over to the Americans.

One of the six gates stood wide open, a death-trap laid by the wily Boxer, believing that the foreign forces would rush through it to be shot down like rats in a hole. Beyond it was a paved court some five hundred yards wide, reaching up to a second wall, equipped likewise with six great gates.

Thaine's company was singled out to go inside the open gate and draw the Boxer fire toward themselves while the American army stormed the closed gates. The little group of men lay flat on the pavement, defending themselves and harassing the enemy. They knew why they had been sent in, but they were seasoned soldiers. Thaine looked down the line of less than a hundred men, McLearn, and Boehringer, Tasker, Goodrich, and Binford, all were in that line. He felt a thrill of soldier pride as he said to himself:

"We are fit. They have chosen us for the sacrifice. We'll prove ourselves." Then he thought of nothing else but duty all that day.

The capture of the first wall opened the way to a second with a paved court beyond it, and beyond that lay a third, and a fourth, and a fifth; wall and court, wall and court, through which, and across which the American army forced its way by heaviest bombarding under heaviest fire, leaving a clean rear for the other armies to follow in. Only the sixth and last wall remained. General Chaffee's men had not failed. The flag of red, white, and blue had led steadily on 'mid a storm of shells and a deluge of bullets.

One more onslaught and the last gates would burst wide open. Eagerly the American soldiers waited the command

to finish the task. But it was not given. The leaders of the other armies had counseled together and prevailed against further advance, whether moved by military prudence or governed by jealousy of the ability of General Chaffee and the magnificent record of the American soldiers in the Orient, the privates could not know.

Just as the command to retire was sounded Japanese coolies had run with scaling ladders to the last wall. It was the supreme moment for Thaine Aydelot. He was only a private, but in that instant all the old dominant Cavalier blood of the Thaines, all the old fearless independence of the Huguenot Aydelots, all the calm poise and courage of the Quaker Penningtons throbbed again in his every pulse-beat. He threw aside his soldier obligation and stood up a man, guided alone by the light within him.

"It is a far cry from the green Kansas prairies to the heart of old China," he declared to himself. "Yet I'll go to the heart of that heart now, and I'll show it the Stars and Stripes of a free people, so help me God!"

He turned and sped to the last wall, snatching the flag from a color-bearer as he ran. At the foot of the ladder the men holding it wavered a little. Thaine threw the flag up to a coolie who was already climbing.

"Take it up. If I don't get up, wave it there if you die for it," he cried as he sprang up the ladder behind the color-bearer.

The shots were thick about them as up and up they went until at last Thaine stood beside the indomitable little Japanese who had carried the American flag up the ladder.

Below the Kansas boy lay the holy city of an ancient civilization in all its breadth of ingenuity and narrowness

of spirit. Standing there, a target for every gun, waving the Star-Spangled Banner out over that old stronghold, he cried:

"This is the end of the wilderness! Look up and see the token of light and hope and love. Other hands than mine will bear them to you, but I have shown you their symbol. I, Thaine Aydelot, of Kansas, first of all the world, have dared to stand on your most sacred walls with Old Glory in my hand. Wherever its shadow falls there is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In God's good time they will all come to you in peace as they have come to you now in warfare. Mine today has been the soldier service, and mine today the great reward."

CHAPTER XXIV

The Call of the Sunflower

Sons and daughters of the prairie,
Dreaming, dreaming,
Of the starry nights that vary,
Gleaming, gleaming!
You may wander o'er your country where the
vales and mountains be,
You may dwell in lands far distant, out beyond
the surging sea.
But ah! just a yellow sunflower, though across
the world you roam,
Will take you back to Kansas and the sun-
kissed fields of home.

— Nancy Parker.

Thaine Aydelot sat with Doctor Carey and Pryor Gaines in the latter's home in the Foreign Compound in Peking.

"I have done my work here," Pryor was saying. "I have only one wish — to go back to old Grass River in Kansas and spend my days with Jim Shirley. We two will both live to be old because we are useless; and Leigh will be marrying one of these times, if the Lord ever made a man good enough for her. So Jim and I can chum along down the years together."

"It is the place for you, Pryor," Doctor Carey asserted. "And now that the ranch is making money while Jim sleeps, you two will be happy and busy as bees. Every neighborhood needs a man or two without family ties. You'll be the most useful citizens in that corner of the prairies. And think of eating Jim Shirley's cooking after this."

"And you, Thaine? What now?" Pryor asked as he looked fondly at the young battle-tried soldier.

"I have done my work here," Thaine quoted his words. "I've only one wish — to go back to old Grass River in Kansas to take my place on the prairie and win the soil to its best uses; to do as good a work as my father has done."

Thaine's dark eyes were luminous with hopefulness, and if a line of pathos for a loss in his life that nothing could fill had settled about his firm mouth, it took nothing from the manliness of the strong young face.

"And you, Carey?" Pryor asked.

Doctor Carey did not reply at once. A strange weariness had crept over his countenance, and a far-away look was in his eyes. The man who had forgotten himself in his service for others was coming swiftly toward his reward. But neither of his friends noted the change now. At last he said:

"Years ago I loved a girl as I never could care for any other girl. She would have loved me sooner or later if something hadn't happened. A message from the man she cared for most fell into my hands one day long ago: a withered flower and a little card. I could have kept them back and won her for my wife, but I didn't. I sent the message to her by a servant boy — and she has been happy always in her love."

Doctor Carey turned his face away for the moment. Thaine Aydelot's eyes were so much like Virginia Thaine's to him just then. Presently he went on:

"Sometimes the thing we fail to get helps us to know better how to live and to live happily. You will not be

a coward, Thaine, when you come, year by year, to know the greater wilderness inside yourself. You will go back to the prairies where you belong, as you say, and you will do a man's part in the big world that's always needing men."

Thaine recalled the evening hour when he and Leigh were on the Purple Notches and he had declared in the pride of his nineteen years that he wanted to go out into the big world that is always needing men and do a man's part there.

"If the big world needs men anywhere, it is on the old prairies," he declared, and the doctor continued: "I have found my future already. I shall not leave China again. Grass River may miss me as a friend but not as a doctor of medicine. Doctors are too plentiful there. My place is here henceforth, and I'm still young. I came to the Philippines to be with Thaine" — Horace Carey's voice was low, and the same old winning smile was on his face — "because I love the boy and because I wanted to protect him if it should be my fortune to do it. I saved him from the waters of the Rio Grande and helped to pull him out of the hospital at Manila. He doesn't need me now, for he goes to do a big work, and I stay here to do a big work."

"Out of love for me alone?" Thaine asked affectionately, throwing one arm about Horace Carey's shoulder.

"No, not you alone," Carey answered frankly, "but because something in your face always reminds me of a face I loved long ago. Of one for whose sake I have cared for you here. You are going home a brave man. I believe your life will be full of service and of happiness."

The silence that followed was broken by Pryor Gaines saying:

"All this time—such a tragical time—I have forgotten, Thaine, that I have a message for you, a little package that reached here late last May. It was sent to me because the sender thought you were coming to China soon, and I was asked to keep it for you. You didn't come, and mails ceased to leave Peking—and then came the siege, the struggle to keep up the defenses, the sickness, the starvation, the deaths, the constant attacks, the final sight of Old Glory on the outer walls, and your triumphal entry through the sewer. You see why I forgot."

He took a little package from his writing desk and gave it into Thaine Aydelot's hand.

The young soldier tried to open it with steady fingers, for the address was in a handwriting he knew well. Inside a flat little box was a card bearing the words:

To Prince Quippi, Beyond the Purple Notches.

And underneath that lay a withered little yellow sunflower.

Two evenings later as the three men sat together, Horace Carey suddenly gripped Thaine's hand in his, then sank back in his chair with eyes that seemed looking straight into eternal peace; and the same smile that had won men to him seemed winning the angels to welcome him heavenward. In the midst of his busy, useful years his big work was done.

The sunflowers were just beginning to blossom along the old Grass River Trail. The line of timber following every

stream was in the full leafage of May. The wheat lay like a yellow-green sea over all the wide prairies. The breeze came singing down the valley, a morning song of gladness.

Leigh Shirley had come up early to the Sunflower Ranch to spend the day and night with Virginia Aydelot, while Asher and her uncle Jim took a two days' business trip to Big Wolf with Darley Champers. Jim had brought Virginia a big bunch of exquisite roses which nobody but Jim Shirley could ever have grown to such perfection.

Virginia went into the house to find the tall cut-glass vase Doctor Carey had sent to her when he started West, while Leigh went to the gate of the side lot to pet a pretty black colt that whinnied to her.

"You beautiful Juno!" she cried, patting the creature's nose. "Mrs. Aydelot says you are as graceful and well-bred as all your grandmothers have been since the time a Juno long ago followed a prairie schooner down the old Grass River Trail to a little sod shack on a treeless claim in the wilderness. This is too fine a morning to go indoors," she added as she came back to the front lawn to the seat under the fragrant white honeysuckle.

She was as sweet as a blossom herself this morning, with her soft brown-gold hair waving back from her face, and her blue eyes full of light.

Somebody had turned from the road and was coming up the walk with springing step. Leigh turned her head to see who it might be, as she reached for a spray of the fragrant honeysuckle, and found Thaine Aydelot standing before her.

With a glad cry, she dropped the blossoms and sprang to her feet.

"Prince Quippi couldn't come nor write, so he sent me. Will I do for an answer, Leighlie? I was coming back to the blessed old prairies, anyhow; to my father and mother and the life of a farmer. I have come to see at last through Asher Aydelot's eyes that wars in any cause are short-lived, and, even with a Christian soldiery, very brutal; that after the wars come the empire-makers, who really conquer, and that the man who patiently wins from the soil its hundredfold of increase may be a king among men. I can see such big things to be done here, but, oh, Leigh, are you sure you want me here?"

Thaine was holding her hands in a gentle grip, looking with love-hungry eyes down into her face.

"I've always been sure I wanted you," Leigh said softly, "and I've always hoped you would come back here to the prairies again. But, Thaine, I'm so proud of you, too, for all the heroic things you have helped to do in the Philippines and in China. I am glad now you did go for a while. You have been a part of a history-making that shall change all the future years."

Thaine put his arm about her and drew her close to him as he said:

"Then we'll go and build a house on the Purple Notches, a purple velvet house with gold knobs, and all that yellow prairie away to the west that was only grass land four years ago we'll turn to wheat fields like Asher Aydelot's here. John Jacobs was holding that ground for somebody like you and me. We'll buy it of his estate. We'll show the fathers what the sons can do."

A thrill of happiness lighted Leigh's face for a moment, then a shadow fell over it as she said:

"Thaine, Darley Champers and I have kept a secret for a year."

"You kept it 'danged' well. What was it?" Thaine asked gaily.

"Jane Aydelot, who died last year, left me all her property," Leigh began.

"Good for Jennie," Thaine broke in, but Leigh hurried on.

"I always knew she meant to do it, and that was one reason why I sent you away. I wouldn't have your money and I felt if you knew you wouldn't ask me for fear I'd think — Oh, money you don't earn or inherit squarely is such a grief," Leigh paused.

"So you wouldn't let me have any hope because of this junk in Ohio that you were afraid you'd get and I'd seem to be wanting if I married you, and you thought I ought to have and you'd seem to be marrying me to get. If I ever have an estate, I'll leave it to foreign missions. I'd like to make trouble for the cuss that got me at the Rio Grande. Money might do it," Thaine declared.

Leigh did not laugh.

"You are right, Thaine. I was so unhappy about it all. For since I first came to Uncle Jim's, I knew I ought not have Miss Jane's love and the farm that you would have had if she knew you."

"You've known this all these years and never told even me. You silent little sub-soiler!" Thaine exclaimed.

"It grew in my mind from an almost babyhood impression to a woman's principle," Leigh declared. "I never

thought of telling anybody. But there was another thing that kept me firm that day on the Purple Notches. Years ago, when I was a baby girl, I remember dimly seeing two men in an awful fight one night just at dusk down on the railroad track by Clover Creek in Ohio. I thought one of them was my father. Miss Jane would never tell me anything about it, and made me promise never to speak of it. So I grew up sure that my father had committed some dreadful crime, and, Thaine, until I knew better, I couldn't take the risk of disgracing your name, the proud name of Aydelot."

"Oh, Leigh, it is no matter what our forefathers do—they were all a bad lot if we go back far enough. It's what we do that counts. It's what I do as Thaine Aydelot, not as Asher Aydelot's son, that I must stand or fall by. It's how far we win our wilderness, little girl, not the wilderness our fathers won or lost."

Thaine was sitting beside Leigh now, under the perfumy white honeysuckle blossoms.

"But, Thaine, the bans are all lifted now."

Leigh sat with face aglow. "Your grandfather wouldn't let his property go to a child of Virginia Aydelot, so Miss Jane couldn't give it to you. She left it to me—all her property, provided, or hoping, I would—you should—" she hesitated.

"Yes, we should, and we will," Thaine finished the sentence. "Bless her good soul! I've always been rather fond of her, anyhow!"

"And Darley Champers found out that my father was accidentally drowned long ago in Clover Creek. Uncle Jim says he never could swim, and so that burden is lifted. But,

Thaine, will you want to go back to Ohio to the Aydelot homestead? I could sell it for a club house to the Cloverdale Country Club, but I waited till you should come, to know what to do."

There was just a little quaver in Leigh's voice.

"Do you want to go back to Ohio?" Thaine inquired. "Unless you do, the country clubbers may have the place. There is no homestead there for me. This is my homestead. I want that open ranch-land beyond the Purple Notches. But, Leigh, if my father as administrator and trustee for John Jacobs' estate can sell me the ground and your inheritance from Jane Aydelot pays for it, what is there left for me to do after all? I can't take favors and give none. I'll run away and enlist with the Regulars first."

A rueful look came over his face now, and behind the words Leigh read a determined will.

"The real thing is left to you," she replied, "the biggest work of all. You must go out and tame the soil. Your father bought his first quarter with money his father had left him by will, but he had no inheritance to buy all the other quarters that make the big Aydelot wheat fields of the Sunflower Ranch. If every acre of the prairie was covered with a layer of eastern capital, borrowed or inherited, it would not make one stalk of wheat grow nor ripen one ear of corn. But you may turn up the soil with your plow and find silver dollars in the furrow. You may herd cattle on the plains, and their dun hides will bring you cloth-of-gold. You may seed the brown fields with alfalfa, and it will take away the fear of protest or over-draft, as the Coburn book says it will. I know, because I've tried

and proved it. Oh, Thaine, with all your grand battles in the East which is always our West, Luzon is still a jungle and China isn't yet in the light. You have only prepared the way for the big things that are to follow. I never hear the old Civil War veterans telling of their achievements in a Grand Army meeting without wishing that, after their great story is told, the Grand Army of the Prairies would tell their tale of how the men and women fought out the battles here with no music of drums nor roar of cannon, nor bugle calls, nor shoulder straps, nor comradeship, nor inspiring heroic climaxes, and straight, fierce campaigns to victory. But just loneliness, and discouragements, and long waiting, and big, foolish-seeming dreams of what might be, with only the reality of the unfriendly land to work upon. I'm so glad you want to stay here and to take that open prairie beyond the Purple Notches for our kingdom."

The happiness in Leigh Shirley's eyes took from Thaine's mind the memory of all the hardship and tragedy of his two years on the battlefield. Her pride in his achievements, her joy in his return and her dream of their future together in a work so full of service, filled his soul with rejoicing, as the May morning opened for these two its paradise of Youth and Love.

Asher and Virginia Aydelot had come out on the veranda to look for Leigh. A moment they waited, then Asher said softly:

"He has forgotten us, but he has come back to the life we love."

"And he will come back to us tenfold more ours, because

his heart is here," Virginia answered, and the two stole softly indoors.

"See the roses Jim brought; they seem to belong to that beautiful vase," Virginia said as they stood at the door of the dining room. "I think Jim must have meant them for Leigh and Thaine."

"Yes, he brought us sunflowers in an old tin peach-can wrapped with a newspaper, and we had no mahogany dining room set and not so much cut-glass and china and silver in our cupboard, nor quite such a good rug on our hardwood floor," Asher replied.

"But we had each other and the vision to see all these things coming to us," Virginia said as she looked up into her husband's face with love-lighted eyes. "I wonder where Jim is."

"Jim is present." Jim Shirley came in quietly from the side porch. "He prepared your wedding supper for you. He buried your first-born, and now he comes to give you a daughter. He's been first aid to the Aydelots all along the line, as he will hope to continue to be, world without end, and a little more."

The homestead on the Purple Notches looks out on a level land stretching away in an unbroken line to the far westward horizon. Broad fields of wheat grow golden in the summer sunshine, and acres of dark alfalfa perfume the air above them. With a clearer vision of what reward farm life may bring for him who goes forth and earns that reward, the man whom the Tondo road made a soldier, Caloocan a patriot, and Yang-Tsun a Christian, has found in the conquest of the soil a life of usefulness and power.

And the father and mother, Asher and Virginia Aydelot, who, through labor and loneliness and hopes long deferred, won a desert to fruitfulness, a wilderness to beauty—these two, in the zenith of their days, have proved their service not in vain, for that they have also won the second generation back to the kingdom whose scepter is the hoe.

Not in vain did the scout of half a century ago drive back the savage Indian from the plains; not in vain did Funston and his "Fighting Twentieth" wade the Tulijan and swim the Marilao; not in vain did Chaffee's army burst the gates of Peking, nor Calvin Titus fling out Old Glory above its frowning walls.

Behind the scout came a patient, brave-hearted band of settlers who, against loneliness and distances and drouth and prairie fire and plague and boom, slowly but gloriously won the wilderness. Into the jungles of Luzon will go the saw and spade and spelling book. Upon the Chinese republic has a new light shined.

Not more to him who drives back the frontier than to him who follows after and wins that wilderness with sword re-shaped to a plow-share does the promise to Asher of old stand evermore secure!

"*Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be. The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.*"

THE END

Books by Margaret Hill McCarter

WINNING THE WILDERNESS

Illustrated by J. N. Marchand

The latest book from Mrs. McCarter's pen is pronounced by critics the best work she has ever done. It is a tale of the soil, of winning the land from wilderness to fruitfulness. The author has written into it a great human story, an epic of the prairies. It is aptly called "The Sunflower Book," for this flower figures in the glowing romance running through its pages—the golden flower that Kansas chose as its emblem because its face is ever turned toward the light.

A MASTER'S DEGREE

Illustrated in color by W. D. Goldbeck

Vivid in its portrayal of fascinating college life, the fine young men and women do more than win victories in athletics and in the classroom—they win out in the battle for character. Vigorous in its practical idealism, this is a story to influence and inspire.

A WALL OF MEN

Illustrated in color by J. N. Marchand

"With God Almighty backing us, we've got to stand up like a wall of men," said one of the Free-soilers, and so they stood, the defenders of liberty and home, on the newly-settled prairie lands—where the tragedy of the Civil War was keenly known. The heroic figure of John Brown appears in the story, and, with all the warring and suffering, young life with its wonderful love moves through the pages of this powerful book.

THE PEACE OF THE SOLOMON VALLEY

Frontispiece by Clara P. Wilson

In a breezy manner the story is told of a New York City man sending his rheumatic son to Kansas for a six months' stay on the ranch of an old Yale chum living in the Solomon Valley. The indignation and expectations of the young man collapse in the face of the facts, and he falls in love with the life of the Kansas farm—and with the farmer's daughter.

THE PRICE OF THE PRAIRIE

Illustrated in color by J. N. Marchand

In this book Mrs. McCarter made her fame secure. It is a great picture of a thrilling time, and a series of events of historic significance. Its pages are redolent of the sweet air and wide landscapes; the pictures come and go of idyllic childhood, of growing love, of Indian danger, of jealousy, of massacre, and of the movement toward the settled life of the plains. It is a poignant and winning record of the price paid for the prairie home.

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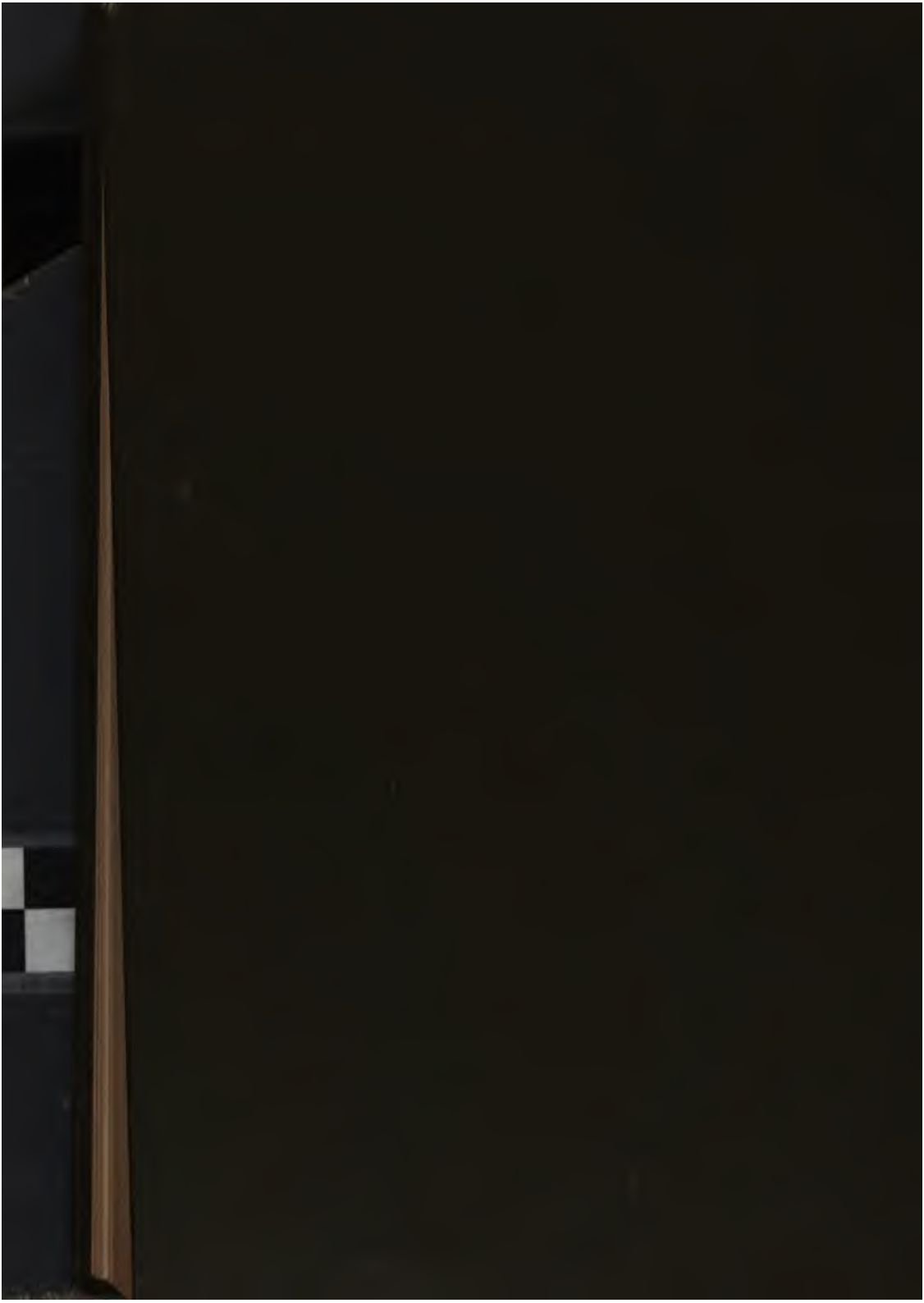
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